

# Societal impact of SSH research: perspectives on co-creation and working with societal readiness levels

## 1. Context

There is an increasing tendency to **measure the societal impact** of SSH research. Attempts to do so are abundant but also disparate. Some relevant examples (= not an exhaustive list):

- Working with case impact studies with a focus on research evaluation (such as the [Research Excellence Framework UK](#), the European [COST Action ENRESSH](#) and the [IMPACT-EV project](#));
- An [Interactive website](#) to boost the impact of digital tools and infrastructure components in Arts and Humanities (a DARIAH-EU initiative);
- Developing models of “Co-creation” (i.e., a form of collaborative creativity that enables innovation with, rather than for, the involved stakeholders) within the H2020 [ACCOMPLISSH project](#). The project also focusses on assessing co-creation processes and their potential in generating impact.

Efforts to measure societal impact align with the idea put forward by researchers, and particularly by policy makers, that SSH research should contribute to developing ‘products’ that can be used by end-users to a very specific aim (e.g., lower the levels of depression in vulnerable populations). To do so, processes that enable the development from a basic theoretical principle to an actual system proven in an operational environment (cfr. the use of Technology Readiness Levels or TRLs), should be facilitated. However, further development of social impact assessment systems should cater the needs of very diverse pathways to impact within SSH as well as carefully avoid pitfalls that could result in boosting artificial impact statistics or ignore the lack of incentives for researchers to engage with stakeholders and vice versa. For example, the focus on peer-reviewed publications has (in exceptional cases) led to publication fraud and to the lack of investment in making research results valuable for stakeholders and society.

## 2. Important perspectives

- There is a **wide variety of areas** in which societal impact can increase the quality of life of individuals and communities locally, nationally and internationally. Achieving economic prosperity, influencing policy making, having an impact on public discourse, improving the societal value of culture and heritage etcetera, might all have their **characteristic pathways**.

- As has been put forward in the Ghent University [position paper IE H2020: The 'SSH embedding Challenge'](#), TRLs are used to measure impact and follow an economical logic. However, the TRL approach is a linear model that is rarely applicable to SSH research projects. For instance, policy influence, a typical form of impact for many SSH researchers, is not created in a linear way. Thus, using the TRLs frustrates the COMs own wish to make high-quality embedded SSH work. And although SSH research includes technology related studies and contributes to an efficient technological impact, its **impact cannot be reduced to technological knowledge transfer**.
- Complex, non-linear processes are inherent to the societal impact of SSH research. Linear models of research use have long been abandoned in favour of more **iterative models of research use** that show sustained engagement between researchers and non-academic partner organizations.
- Setting up a constructive and bi-directional relationship between non-academic stakeholders and researchers requires installing **incentives** (both intrinsic as well as extrinsic) for both parties. A change of academic culture should strive for a higher appreciation of an applied research focus, making fundamental research more sensitive to achieving societal impact, and a recognition of academics who acquired skills to work with stakeholders. Non-academic stakeholders could be involved from the beginning of a research project (development of research question, selection/evaluation of proposals), play an active part in the dissemination and uptake, up until the evaluation of results and societal impact.
- Achieving societal impact and making it visible, requires that researchers have a **research impact strategy**. Since pathways to impact are diverse, it is important that researchers together with stakeholders develop a research impact strategy where they choose both qualitative (e.g., a description of the process that led to reaching impact) as well as quantitative methods to assess impact (e.g., number of visitors of a website or an exhibition, number of reads of a particular article on a science blog).

### 3. Questions?

If you have questions, please contact Ms [Wendy Sonneveld](#), Sr Policy Advisor European Affairs, Research Department/EU Office at Ghent University, T +32 9 264 9562.