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Europe Looks for Better Ways to Measure the Value of the Arts and Humanities

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By Ellen Hazelkorn



An infrared camera is used to study a 16th-century painting. Arts and humanities research like this is under more pressure from policy makers to demonstrate its value to society.

How can universities demonstrate the benefit that arts and humanities research provides to society? It's a perennial question and one that has become more urgent in Europe in recent years. I belong to a European consortium, supported by the [Humanities in the European Research Area](#), that is investigating ways to better understand, capture, and measure the impact of the arts and humanities on society.

The arts and humanities have traditionally explained themselves in terms of intrinsic value; this has arguably been so since academe's earliest days. While universities may differ in the emphasis they place on different disciplines, the belief that society benefits from the pursuit of knowledge and the scholarship generated by universities remains at the heart of the arts and humanities. This helps explain the strong endorsement of the liberal arts in the United States as the bedrock of undergraduate education. However, that certainty of value is now being challenged.

The arts and humanities feel increasingly marginalized because they are often viewed by policy makers as useless for creating new technologies and improving the economy. It's much easier to explain why we should invest millions of dollars in research that might cure cancer, rather than in literary history, language studies, or the analysis of philosophical texts.

However, it should not be forgotten that the arts and humanities have led to world-changing insights. One of the most important discoveries of all time is the rules of grammar by the Indian linguist Panini in the sixth century. His grammar-formalism was ultimately used as a model for higher-level computer programming, which has made information and communication technologies possible. Current developments in computational and digital humanities are leading to many important advances in speech recognition and automatic

translation, such as Google Translate. Those developments would not have been possible without the study of theoretical linguistics.

Sidestepping a rather time-consuming argument about which disciplines are more worthy of our support, we should question how we demonstrate or measure value. The flaw in our thinking may be an overreliance on a simplistic understanding of what matters. Over recent decades, and especially during this long economic crisis, what matters most for governments is research that leads directly to job creation and increases national competitiveness.

Yet it might be better to consider research creating value through “ripples” of new ideas. These are felt throughout society in a variety of ways, some of them oblique. For example, the net effect created by the employment of workers, in addition to the actual product, includes the payment of suppliers who purchase other supplies, the employees who spend their income on goods and services in their neighborhood, and so on.

Similarly, the influence of research is felt in more ways than simply through the publication of peer-reviewed articles. Our understanding of the natural world has probably been more affected by watching David Attenborough wildlife programs than by reading articles in either *Science* or *Nature*. The popularity of the Discovery and History channels provides another example of the myriad ways the public consumes research. Britain’s Open University has had more than [56 million downloads](#) of its material on iTunes since it launched, in January 2012. YouTube and other forms of social media will further democratize access to new ideas.

Those diverse examples help illustrate the point that measuring the quantity and impact of research through peer-reviewed journal articles and citation is only the tip of the iceberg. Bibliometrics misses and distorts the real story of how researchers can demonstrate the significance or relevance of their work for economic, sociocultural, or technological purposes. It especially undermines the real value of arts and humanities research.

Thus, in addition to books and book chapters, research outlets may include legal cases, maps, major art works or award-winning designs, policy documents and technical reports, documentaries and radio programs, live performances, exhibitions, cultural artifacts, and many other activities. Impact can also be felt through teaching, improvements in productivity and the quality of life, increased employment, informed public debate, policy change, social innovation, and so on.

The difficulty lies in capturing that complex web of ideas and influences in a way that is not a simplistic counting exercise and addresses policy and public pressure for greater accountability. This is not easy.

Higher-education research should not be seen as a zero-sum game, where arts and humanities research is pitted against technology and the economy. Unfortunately, that narrow approach is evident in [Star Metrics](#), developed by the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the White House Office of Science and Technology.

One possible alternative is the system of quality indicators for the humanities developed in 2011 by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. The model aims to capture both scholarly output *and* societal quality. Because the outcome of the process is not linked to funds or resource allocation, there is less incentive for perverse behavior.

But it's still early days. Measuring the value of arts and humanities research is contested territory. Many people find it anathema to even discuss the concept of measuring research, while others are wedded to the traditional methods.

Ultimately, the solution lies somewhere in between those hard-line stances. But first we need to get a much better understanding of how research ideas ripple across society. If we can map those transactions, it might help universities, and policy makers, find a better way to demonstrate how arts and humanities research contributes to society—and not just the economy.

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