



The Role of the Humanities and Social Sciences: Discussion Paper

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FEDERATION FOR THE
HUMANITIES AND
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DES SCIENCES
HUMAINE

300-275 Bank, Ottawa, ON K2P 2L6
www.ideas-idees.ca



Background and purpose

For 78 years, the Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences has been a national voice for scholars. Now the Federation is conducting a major review of how the humanities and social sciences contribute to society and how those contributions are communicated. The objective is to create a comprehensive, evidence-based, modern picture of the value of research and education in these fields, to share it within our community, and to raise awareness of its conclusions among politicians, civil servants, businesspeople, and Canadians at large.

What you're about to read has been prepared to spark discussion and help us start this important conversation. It explores some of the reasons why *now* is an important time to undertake this project, and it proposes some broad categories for talking about the value of the humanities and social sciences. At the end, you'll find a short set of discussion questions that we hope you'll answer, plus details about the project's next steps and how you can be involved.

An essential service

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences study people. We study how they think and feel. We study how they relate and communicate, how they organize and work, how they learn and express themselves. We study what they have done in the past that shapes the present and informs the future. This study helps people to build the communities they desire and live the lives they choose. Scholars enrich the lives of the people they study.

Those who work in the humanities and social sciences know this. So do others. The Fundamental Science Review, the independent panel appointed to study federal research funding, emphasized the importance of these disciplines. "From the social sciences and humanities," the panel noted, "contributions range from deeper understanding of the complexity of human nature and social structures to grace in self-expression and excellence and beauty in the performing arts."¹ The federal government agreed, it seems. While significantly increasing total research investments, the 2018 federal budget also modestly increased the share of funding going to the humanities and social sciences.

The economic importance of these disciplines is also being recognized. A growing number of experts are predicting that automation driven by artificial intelligence will not only eliminate much of the repetitive physical work done by people but also many routine cognitive tasks. What will remain—and likely grow in value—is what people do that cannot be reduced to an algorithm, including creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, empathy and other relational skills. These are central to the research of our scholars and integral to the education our students receive.

¹ Advisory Panel on Federal Support for Fundamental Science (2017), "Investing in Canada's Future: Strengthening the Foundations of Canadian Research," p. 5, [http://www.sciencereview.ca/eic/site/059.nsf/vwapi/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf/\\$file/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf](http://www.sciencereview.ca/eic/site/059.nsf/vwapi/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf/$file/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf)



The same is true in the public sphere. Along with an explosion of social media, we have experienced a surge in “fake news,” fragmentation, and polarization. These trends pose a threat to our democracy that could easily accelerate as widely available technologies make it easy to produce and distribute almost any kind of content. Technologists who have considered the implications of these trends have raised a host of profound questions about trust in institutions, social cohesion, democratic discourse, and even the very concept of truth. Not only can the humanities and social sciences investigate these questions, they can help form the engaged, informed citizens we’ll need to resist the threats of the “post-truth” era.

And this is increasingly true of many of society’s most pressing issues: they are much more than technical challenges and resolving them will require much more than technical knowledge. Climate change, for one, is rigorously studied by within the natural sciences, but solutions won’t come from physicists, chemists or engineers working alone. Economists, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, historians, and others in the humanities and social sciences have essential contributions to make. The same is true of other major, public challenges: if it involves people, it involves the humanities and social sciences.

Yet, despite all this, we continue to see signs that awareness of the contributions made by the humanities and social sciences is not widespread, or at least not as widespread as we need it to be. Myths persist about our students’ job prospects and career paths. The value of our graduates to employers tends to be overlooked, and their diverse and essential contributions to our economy are only partially understood. For most of the past decade, public policy and programs skewed away from our fields of study as governments grew more preoccupied with technical skills and applied technology. Meanwhile, some populists go so far as to ridicule scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

We should not be content with this state of affairs. If the vital contributions of the humanities and social sciences are not well understood, we will overlook precisely those skills, areas of knowledge and resources we need most in order to address some of our greatest challenges. Similarly, the more that people understand our role, the more effective we can be as scholars. A society that values scholarship is one where our students will gain more from teaching and our research will have more impact in the surrounding society.

A call to action

We feel that the humanities and social sciences community has a responsibility to help address this disconnect and more clearly articulate the value of the humanities and social sciences to Canadians. The Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences is taking action in 2018. Throughout the year, the Federation will conduct a major review of how the humanities and social sciences contribute to society and how those contributions are communicated. The Federation cannot do this alone. No one knows the work of scholars better than scholars, so we need our members to get involved. Consider this an invitation to join this urgent conversation.



Starting a conversation

This project is in its early stages, and its structure is not settled. That is deliberate. We want to hear from our members before we decide precisely how to proceed. Below, we describe seven roles that the humanities and social sciences perform to support a healthy society. Our goal here is to not be too abstract. We want to describe the contributions of the humanities and social sciences in concrete ways that are compelling and accessible to all Canadians, including those with non-academic backgrounds. That said, these suggestions are not final, and if there are better ways to structure the discussion, we hope you'll tell us.

1. Addressing complex challenges

As mentioned above, the most difficult problems we face as a society involve people, and social systems cannot possibly be addressed with technical knowledge alone. Climate change is one example. Reconciliation is another. Knowledge generated from the humanities and social sciences is needed to address the important psychological, social, historical and cultural factors that shape these challenges.

The chair of the German Council of Science and Humanities, Manfred Prenzel, provided the following useful description of this challenge in a 2016 speech: “These challenges are grand in that they affect many people from all walks of life. Typically, these challenges are trans-national to global in scope, and they develop in the long rather than the short to medium term. They are also complex, affecting huge and complicated systems of animate and inanimate objects to be described by a multitude of variables at different scales covering many orders of magnitude. As a consequence, knowledge from a large number of disciplines is required in order to understand these systems and their dynamics.”²

2. Supporting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples

Reconciliation is one of Canada's most pressing priorities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report explains that to achieve reconciliation – establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples – “there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes and action to change behavior.”³

The humanities and social sciences have an important role to play—and a responsibility—in building and sustaining this movement in Canada. Through the work they do in research and teaching, scholars in these fields are well placed to support the process of truth telling,

² Manfred Prenzel (2016), “Grand Societal Challenges as an issue for research and innovation policy,” speech at the Annual Meeting of the Chairs and Secretaries of the National Advisory Councils for Science, Research and Innovation Policy in Europe 10th November 2016, Cologne, https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/Speech_Chairman_Annual_Meeting_2016.pdf

³ “The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada” (2015), Vol 6, Introduction, p. 4.



atonement and positive change that needs to occur in the education system, in public policy and in society at large.⁴

Changing behavior cannot happen without changing minds and hearts. The scholarly community can help in this process by fostering understanding and appreciation of the past and common future, of different sets of knowledge and of other ways to organize community life. For this to happen, working with Indigenous peoples as equal partners, recognizing and embracing their meaningful contributions to scholarship and to the advancement of an inclusive, democratic and prosperous society is key.

3. Supporting a cohesive, democratic society

The long-term well-being of Canadians depends on our ability to maintain a cohesive society supported by a healthy democracy, where Canadians with different backgrounds and beliefs are able to collaborate effectively in their professional, political and personal lives. In an era of rapid technological and social change, the knowledge created and imparted by scholars in the humanities and social sciences will be needed to maintain the crucial social foundations, such as trusted public institutions, effective public policies, healthy communities and strong cultural connections. Canada will continue to need new thinking on these issues that reflect its unique bilingual, federal and multicultural and context.

This need is described succinctly in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' major 2013 report, *The Heart of the Matter*: "Today, our need for a broadly literate population is more urgent than ever. As citizens, we need to absorb an ever-growing body of information and to assess the sources of that information. As workers, we need to adapt to an ever-accelerating rate of technological change and to reflect on the implications of these changes. As members of a global community, we need to look beyond our borders to communicate and interact with individuals from societies and cultures different from our own."⁵

4. Essential skill development

About half of Canada's post-secondary students are enrolled in humanities and social sciences programs, and these students go on to play important roles throughout society, as seen in their high rates of employment and earnings that are well above the median. These strong employment outcomes should come as no surprise. Canadian employers routinely tell us that social and cognitive skills are more important to them than technical skills when it comes to

⁴ For instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 11, 16, 62, and 65 highlight the issues of (a) funding and access to post-secondary education by Indigenous students, (b) representation of Indigenous languages in post-secondary education programming, (c) faculty professional development and (d) partnerships and research supporting reconciliation.

⁵ American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2013), "The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a vibrant, competitive, and secure nation," p. 18, <https://www.amacad.org/content/publications/publication.aspx?d=21724>



hiring new employees.⁶ And what's more, as new technologies allow for more and more automation, the demand for these skills is only expected to grow.

5. Ensuring benefits from emerging technology

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and gene therapies create new opportunities to improve lives, but they also introduce new risks. Ensuring that we are able to seize the benefits of new technologies while avoiding the dangers will require us to improve our social systems along with technical systems. Consider, for instance, driverless vehicles. The potential for decreased urban traffic may be welcome, but the potential loss of employment among professional drivers and unclear liability for accidents would be much less so. Addressing the societal implications of emerging technologies will draw on the work of a wide array of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

We can see the role that humanities and social science scholars play in these discussions already in numerous collaborations between industry, government and the research communities, such as Genome Canada's GE3LS program (Genomics and its Ethical, Environmental, Economic, Legal and Social Aspects); the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research's AI & Society program; and the Canadian Content in a Digital World consultation conducted by Heritage Canada in 2016-17.

6. Advancing equity and inclusion

One of Canada's most pressing challenges is ensuring that people from all backgrounds are able to prosper, thrive and contribute to society, free from discrimination. To do so, we must confront historic injustice and find ways to support disadvantaged groups. Knowledge from humanities and social sciences is crucial in helping us better understand the historical, structural and social forces that contribute to multiple forms of inequality, as well as the best options for ensuring equity and inclusion in our diverse society.

This is a story told well in Canada's recent history. Our humanities and social sciences scholars made major contributions to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970, the establishment of the Canadian Human Rights Commission in 1977 and the passing of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982. The humanities and social sciences community remains committed to advancing equity and inclusion in Canada, and its scholars are regular fixtures in conversations on these issues in the media and in the public-policy process.

7. Producing and preserving knowledge about ourselves

The creation of new knowledge and the preservation of knowledge from the past fundamentally enrich the human experience, expanding our capabilities, ideas and perspectives. Canada's humanities and social science scholars are instrumental in discovering, preserving, and mobilizing knowledge about Canada and Canadians, including our history, languages and cultural heritage.

⁶ See, for instance, Business Council of Canada (2018), "Navigating change: 2018 Business Council Skills Survey," <http://thebusinesscouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Navigating-Change-2018-Skills-Survey-1.pdf>



And the benefits of this scholarship do not belong exclusively to academics. As Peter Salovey, the President of Yale University, observed in 2017, “our scientists are better at their work if they read literature; our diplomats and our generals are more effective when they understand languages; our data scientists are able to think beyond algorithms when they experience art and music.”⁷

Get involved

You’ve read the seven problem statements that constitute the initial part of this study. Do you agree with our observations about the value of humanities and social sciences scholarship and that awareness of this value is lacking? If so, how do you think we should respond? How do you feel about the seven headings for investigating the value of humanities and social sciences scholarship? Should some be revised or dropped? Have we missed something?

To provide input and follow the project as it develops, please visit www.ideas-idees.ca/role-HSS, where you can find instructions about getting involved. Options include:

In person: The Federation will host a series of in-person round table discussions with members to explore the key themes of this project at the University of Regina during Congress 2018.

Virtually: For those who cannot attend Congress in Regina, virtual round table discussions will take place in June 2018 that can be accessed by either computer or by telephone.

In writing: If you would like to submit your ideas in writing, please send us a document that addresses the four discussion questions below as well as anything else you would like to add. Please send written submissions to pseverinson@ideas-idees.ca by June 30 (please try to keep submissions to fewer than six pages).

If you are interested in providing input but are not able to participate through one of the options above, please contact the project lead, Peter Severinson, at pseverinson@ideas-idees.ca.

⁷ Peter Salovey (2017), “Why we need the humanities more than ever, by the President of Yale,” Website of the World Economic Forum, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/the-key-to-responsible-and-responsive-leadership-the-humanities?utm_content=buffer03ed0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer



Discussion questions

Throughout our conversations—whether live, online or in writing—we will be asking participants to respond to a few key discussion questions. Whether you're preparing to take part in one of our round table discussions or are making a written submission, please consider the following:

1. The paper begins with an observation that awareness of the contributions of the humanities and social sciences is not widespread and may in fact be in decline. Do you agree with this statement? How does it align with your experience?
2. If you do agree with our initial observation, how do you think the humanities and social sciences community should respond?
3. This paper presents a set of initial ideas about how to describe the roles that HSS scholarship performs to support a healthy society. Which of these roles do you find compelling? Which ones do you not? How can they be improved? What key ideas have we missed?
4. Are there any other approaches to describing the value of the humanities and social sciences that you think we should consider?

Next steps

The Federation believes strongly that humanities and social science scholars make invaluable contributions to a healthy society, and it is imperative that we work to communicate this value to Canadians. The Federation also believes that these messages must be crafted in collaboration with our community, to help us reflect the diverse viewpoints and values of our members. We therefore encourage members of the HSS community to review this discussion paper and join us in a conversation about how we can improve the ideas listed here.

Please visit <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/issues/role-HSS> to contribute to this project and to see updates on its progress.

