Université de Lorraine position on the role of SSH research for the upcoming programming period 2028 to 2034

The main points of the UL position

1 We support the suggestion of the so-called Heitor report to introduce a European Societal Challenges Council (ESC2) for the upcoming framework programme 10 (FP10).

2 We strongly encourage a more institutionalised focus on SSH research in the upcoming programming period, also in coordinating positions. For this, we suggest a new framework of SSH-led inter- and transdisciplinary research projects within the ESC2, focusing on the social evolution linked to all transitions.

3 We propose the suggestion of a pilot SSH-led coordination and support action (CSA)-type research project in the next Horizon Europe work programme 2026-27. This will set up a trial of SSH-led inter- and transdisciplinary research and facilitate the development of the necessary structures of the proposed idea.

Background

The University of Lorraine (UL), one of the largest French public research universities, is based in Lorraine, Grand Est, France. With more than 60,000 students spanning 49 geographic locations, it is considered nationwide as being first in terms of engineering education and student entrepreneurship. The university brings together more than 3,900 researchers in 10 research centres comprising 60 research laboratories. In this regard, the UL owns 220 patent families and hosts plug-in labs, rendering it a leading R&I incubator.

Regarding the current global situation, the goals and missions of the EU are grouped around the topics of prosperity, security, defence, competitiveness, and innovation. Pursuing these objectives will require the execution of parallel and intertwined transitions: green, digital, industrial, and social.

The new European Commission defines its priorities with a focus on these transitions (*Europe's Choice*, July 2024). *The new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness* as one of the key elements wants to see research and innovation at the heart of the economy, and it wants to build a clean industrial deal. The so-called Draghi report (*The Future of European Competitiveness*, Sept. 2024) is taking these elements and stressing the importance and urgency of the sustainable competitiveness of the EU, with a special focus on economy, industry, and innovation. Especially in the context of the ongoing polycrisis, there is a call for quick and rapid adaptation, which will also affect the EU research and innovation.

In this context, we want to stress the importance both of fundamental research and of research without an immediate innovative outcome. SSH research is and will stay crucial for the support of the transitions, whose impact on the European society we need to follow, observe, and analyse. In accordance with the Draghi report we further need to strengthen and support the development of new technologies and innovative research. One of the most likely consequences will be the implementation of more research at a higher technology readiness level (TRL). A parallel analysis of the societal readiness levels (SRL) will allow a quick response to the impact of new technologies, leading to an optimised integration in society. The parallel investigation of TRL and SRL should furthermore allow well-adapted regulations to create incentives for European innovation to stay in the EU. We therefore advocate for a preservation and evolution of SSH research in the in the next research framework and competitiveness fund.

Suggestion for the future of European SSH research

The recently published so-called Heitor report (*Align, Act, Accelerate*, Oct.2024) was issued by the expert group on the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe (the currently active framework programme 9), and recommends several new approaches for FP10. Besides working towards the goal of "making Europe globally competitive, secure, sustainable and resilient" (recommendation 2), the report suggests the creation of an Industrial Competitiveness Council to stimulate industrial research, development and innovation investment (recommendation 6). A European Societal Challenges Council (ESC2) (recommendation 7) is suggested in order to enhance the research on current challenges, especially with a stronger role of SSH in research and in the work focusing on the transitions.

We strongly agree with the suggestion to strengthen the position of SSH research. Especially regarding the objectives of the European Commission and the needed transitions, a long-term implementation of many objectives will lead to changes influencing the structure and organisation of life in Europe. The ESC2 would implement an instrument to accompany these changes from the beginning, while observing, analysing, and easing its influences on the society.

Due to the importance and relevance of an SSH perspective, as well as an inclusion of social aspects during the technological development along the innovation value chain linked to the transitions, we furthermore want to propose a transversal framework for SSH-led inter- and transdisciplinary projects within the ESC2. This

includes questions regarding the evolution of society in the context of technological innovation both on an individual and global level, as well as the impact of the different transitions on all aspects of life in the European Union. The integration of a societal perspective will be crucial for a sustainable and long-term development and implementation of innovative technologies.

Within such a framework, SSH research would have the possibility to take a more central position in crucial flagship projects regarding the major objectives of the Commission with high SRLs. This framework in ESC2 would be an evolution of SSH flagging. We propose a bottom-up approach for these projects to fully benefit of the expertise of SSH communities. Finally, SSH-led consortia could provide a non-oriented research to anticipate the societal evolution in relation to the major transitions, and provide both the European Commission and the private sector with a better understanding of these evolutions. This will make it possible to speed up the integration of new technologies with an appropriate regulation. Moreover, having a better understanding of societal changes in the context of transitions would allow new technologies to better meet European societal needs and to prevent innovation from leaving Europe.

Proposition of a pilot interdisciplinary CSA-type project on energy transition

The institutionalisation of SSH-led inter- and transdisciplinary projects will require a standardised approach and set structures. While interdisciplinarity and cross-cutting collaboration in research is nothing new, SSH research is more often found in a supplementary role in projects coordinated by other disciplines. The SSH flagging in Horizon Europe is encouraging this mode of SSH integration.

We want to evolve the SSH flagging and demonstrate how our idea would answer both the objectives of the Commission and the needs of the SSH community. We suggest a new topic for a pilot interdisciplinary CSA-type project for the next Horizon Europe work programme 2026-2027 to evaluate our idea. For this pilot project we propose to focus on one of the key goals of the Commission from a primarily societal view, coordinated by SSH research, analysing the societal challenges and functioning as an umbrella bringing together the other disciplines that cover the relevant (natural) scientific aspects. Prepared and supported for the last years and accelerated by the consequences of the Ukraine war, the energy transition and its impact on the different aspects of the European society are a suitable research object for the pilot project.

We would like to invite the partners of UL to join this project. SSH research has a crucial influence on the development of our society in the context of the envisioned transitions; and we should be careful to not let short-termed goals and the notion of emergency let us forget that.