

Social Science and Humanities Ideas Festival Launch Event – Engagement Session

20 Mar 2024, 9.30 – 11.30am

NUS University Hall Auditorium

SMU President, Professor Lily Kong

Advancing Social Science and Humanities Research in Singapore

Minister Chan Chun Sing,

SSRC Chairman Peter Ho,

Distinguished guests,

Good morning.

SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES: EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

Some years ago, in conversation with colleagues about research and its relevance to society, the discussion turned to how important it was for a wider audience to understand the issues and developments in various academic disciplines, so that they can see relevance in what we do. The scientists in the group pointed to the weekly dedication of two pages in the Straits Times to science and technology. They saw how useful it was that the world of scientific discoveries and technological innovations had dedicated attention.

In a spirit of generous sharing of good practice, my scientist colleagues encouraged the social scientists in the group to lobby the Straits Times for dedicated space to address issues germane to the social sciences. A fellow social scientist piped up at this juncture. With a wry smile, he said, “No need. The rest of the papers *is* about the social sciences.”

And so it is - that the sorts of research that we undertake in the humanities and social sciences deal with every aspect of our lives – fertility rates, bilateral relations, crime, social cohesion, inflation, unemployment, healthcare accessibility, legal reforms, sports, arts, food, and the list goes on. Even in the domain of science and technology, the social sciences and humanities are integral to an understanding of how science and technology is relevant to humanity, and how it is to be harnessed for the betterment of society. I am reminded of the movie title “Everything everywhere all at once”. The social sciences and humanities deal with every aspect of our lives.

Investment in social sciences and humanities research is thus critical. We neglect it at our own peril. Social sciences and humanities research is a strategic asset that can help Singapore navigate increasingly complex and interrelated challenges confronting our society. Technologies will undoubtedly be part of the solutions the world needs, but technologies alone, without an understanding of individual psychologies, societal values, political relations, legal and policy frameworks, regulatory regimes and workable business models will simply not suffice.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS: OPPORTUNITIES IN THE LOCAL SSHR SCENE

There was a time when getting into the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at NUS was not something to shout about. While I had qualified for a number of Faculties, I chose FASS, and had to apologetically explain why to well-meaning friends and family. This was so even though the government had already recognized the value of attracting bright teenagers into what was then called the PROMSHO programme, today called the Humanities Programme. While PROMSHO and its successor programme has been in place since 1981, there is still a gap today in Singapore academia of sufficient bright and talented young scholars to replace older ones like myself when the time comes for me to retire.

And so it is fitting that, over the years, more has been done to increase the opportunities and up the attraction quotient for an academic career in the social sciences and humanities, and to support the work in these domains.

Increased opportunities

In my undergraduate years in the 1980s, there was but one FASS in town. Today, five of the six autonomous universities offer combinations of these disciplines. In fact, with a more expansive notion of humanities and social sciences, all six autonomous universities house some of these disciplines. Aspiring academics in these domains have more choice than has ever been the case in Singapore. There are also postgraduate scholarship and postdoctoral fellowship schemes to support those interested to join academia, including the social sciences and humanities.

Funding support

Three decades ago, as my colleagues and I sought to apply for a grant to support a project on Singapore's globalization efforts, to the tune of \$250,000, we had to fight hard because a grant of this scale in the social sciences was unheard of. Today, we are exhorted to go for grants in the seven to eight digits, and thought to be unambitious enough otherwise. There are myriad schemes that provide funding, as you will see on the screen. From 1994 when MOE's Academic Research Fund was started, to a "stepped up" version in 2006 that came with oversight by an internationally renowned Academic Research Council, to the introduction of Tier 3 grants (of \$5-25m) in 2011, investment in research has been on a positive trajectory for three decades now. The turning point for the social sciences in particular may well have been the 2016 establishment of the Social Science Research Council that now represents a dedicated resource.

Researchers have risen to the challenge, but insufficiently so. In the last 13 years of MOE Tier 3 grant availability, only two have been awarded in the social sciences. Both have supported research on ageing at the Singapore Management University, which has allowed the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA) to run the Singapore Life Panel. This is likely the largest high frequency longitudinal survey globally, collecting data on different dimensions of well-being for Singaporeans aged between 50 and 70 at baseline (which was July 2015). The SLP surveys an average of 7500 monthly respondents, out of a base of 12,000 individuals, and has involved nearly 500,000 interviews to date. With such comprehensive data, ROSA's research informs evidence-based

policies and interventions to enhance the quality of life for older Singaporeans. We need more ambitious long term projects such as this.

The Social Science and Humanities Fellowship has seen more successes. In 2022, four promising early career colleagues have been supported up to \$1m each over five years, in interesting areas, as you see on the screen. They join 12 others who have been awarded the Fellowship since 2018. Together, these represent the promising next generation for whom funding support is now competitively available for more ambitious projects as long as there are good proposals.

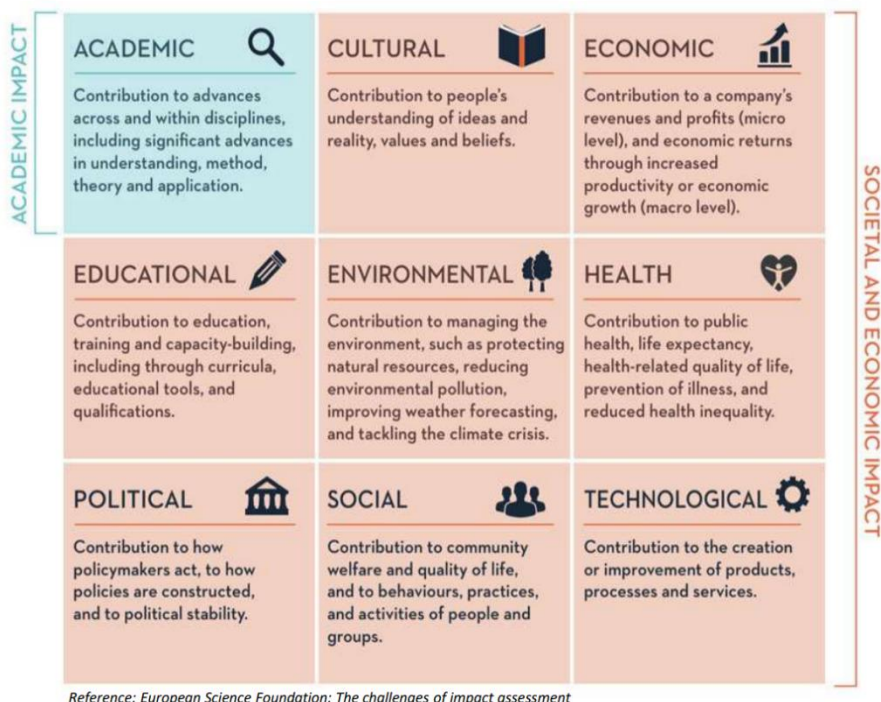
Still further along the succession pipeline, SSRC has now introduced the SSRC Graduate Research Fellowship (GRF). The scheme targets outstanding early-career Singaporean social science and humanities researchers who have been accepted for their doctoral or postdoctoral training at leading overseas institutions. They have access to a research grant and an opportunity to be mentored by an experienced researcher here in Singapore. These were unheard of in my time. Clearly, more resources have been made available to support social sciences and humanities research over the years, and universities need to continue working in concerted ways to build the pipeline of Singaporean scholars.

WHAT IS IMPACTFUL RESEARCH?

Let me turn now to another issue close to my heart. With more opportunities for SSH scholars, the question is 'research to what end'. Academia has developed its own system of assessing research quality and impact, and as with many things, the system has taken a life of its own. Publications in top tier journals, with university presses, garnering high citations, finetuned in analysis to h-indices and field weighted citation indices, and more – this is the dominant language of impact. What they seek to capture is in effect academic impact. But at its most meaningful, academic impact comes when research shifts academic understanding by advancing theory and method or when it changes received wisdom about something. Where we publish and how many cite us are proxy indicators.

But what about impact beyond academia? The UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) defines research impact as “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy”, benefiting individuals, organisations, regions or nations. The ESRC further categorises research impact in terms of **instrumental impact**, **conceptual impact** and **capacity building**. Instrumental impact comes when we influence the development of policy, practice or services, shape legislation and change behaviour. Conceptual impact occurs when researchers contribute to the understanding of policy issues and reframe debates. And if our research gets taken into technical and personal skill development, we would have contributed to **capacity building**.

Elsewhere, the European Science Foundation has developed this grid in thinking about research impact, which deserves discussion, but time does not permit. Nevertheless, a quick glance will give you an intuitive sense.



I often encourage my students to undertake research because they see a societal challenge to address, for which the desired impact of their work is to contribute to a different perspective, or be part of the solutioning. This is in contrast to starting a research project because there is a gap in the literature. This gives our work greater purpose. It entails identifying key stakeholders, understanding their needs, and working with them to frame the research from the start. It extends to engaging stakeholders in translating research findings into actionable outcomes.

Similarly, it behoves us to think, from the beginning, who we want our research to speak to. All too often, our assumption is that we should speak to other academics only, and those in the Global North at that, through our publications and conference presentations. But we might also determine, from the get go, that we want our work communicated to policy makers, business leaders, non-profit sector actors, and communities, and in formats more palatable than the standard academic publications. Examples include podcasts, videos, exhibitions, performances, popular books, toolkits, and training manuals. These channels invite more wide-ranging feedback, foster dialogue and open up opportunities for use. How do we account for them in our standard way of assessment?

THE FUTURE OF SSHR IN SINGAPORE

Time is short, so I have to conclude. There is no question that there is much more going for social sciences and humanities academics and researchers now than in the last few decades. There are more career options, more funding opportunities, more recognition of the importance of these domains, and more willingness to collaborate. This is the first and easier part.

The greater challenge is for us to think about how we can begin a movement to value demonstrable impact in both academic and societal terms. Academically, this means we look for evidence of how a particular work has shifted the ways in which other academics think and do their work; in societal terms, this means looking for evidence of how we make a difference to society, economy and humanity.

We have come a long way in the first mission, and must press on. We are not quite yet at the starting line for the second mission, but what a meaningful challenge it is for us to embrace.

Thank you.