SPECIFIC SSH RESEARCH AND GENERAL RESEARCH POLICY INSTRUMENTS. THE CASE OF THE NATIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAMMES AND "NEED DRIVEN SSH RESEARCH" IN LITHUANIA

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INTRODUCTION

Scientific research is confronted with a number of opposition-based choices: interdisciplinary or disciplinary, fundamental (basic) or applied, academic research or innovation, blue-sky or mission (policy, agenda) driven research aiming more at either advancement of knowledge or practical societal impact. The choices are made even more complicated by the traditional duality of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) research deeply ingrained into their methodologies and abilities to serve the most urgent needs of society. However, the essence of any research, cutely summed up by the initiators of the conference *Impact of Social Sciences and Humanities for a European Research Agenda – Valuation of SSH in mission-oriented research*, is as follows: *"Scientific research is about transformation – how to enable it, or how to avoid it."* (König et al. 2018: 4). The transformative power of research and its mission to influence society and to be influenced by its needs has been widely discussed by politicians and researchers, especially in the case of SSH research. Growing push for transparency of public funds and accountability coming from citizens combined with criticisms against SSH for being socially inefficient, ideologically biased and living in an ivory tower caused activities directed towards the improvement of societal impact.

Societal impact of the SSH research is a frequently used but insufficiently conceptualised notion. Hence a bad need to define it from two different perspectives: usage or bottom-up approach that helps to identify its present most widely spread senses and connotations and top-down approach aiming at re-thinking the transformative relationship between science and society and re-defining the notion of *impact*. The same holds for the related notions of *social* and political impact, social benefits, impact evaluation or valorisation, etc. Any attempts prior to re-defining SSH impact to measure and account for social or societal impact (let alone to provide indexing systems) are deemed for vague and imprecise outcomes.

Whatever the notion of impact nowadays may be, research funding organisations on both national and transnational level usually prioritise policy driven and mission-oriented research. Blue-sky research is welcome on the condition of clear commitments and evidence for a measurable societal impact. A closer look at the variety of SSH research policy and funding instruments might reveal their impact driven orientation and funders' attempts to lure researchers out of their ivory towers. It is worthwhile to observe how researchers respond to research policy push on behalf of research funders. In that respect Lithuania can provide a good case study for various types of research instruments and their uptake by SSH researchers as the government aims at financing research for the sake of a better societal impact. However, it is obvious that without a clearer understanding of what research impact is expected to be and without a specified notion of the impact of the SSH research, the aim cannot be achieved.

SSH RESEARCH POLICY IN LITHUANIA: BACKGROUND AND LANDSCAPE

A large-scale funding of competitive research (alongside with the basic funding of academic institutions) was introduced in 2008 by the Research Council of Lithuania that was made up of two committees, the Committee of Natural and Technical Sciences, and the Committee of the Social Science and Humanities. Both committees participated on equal bases in initiating calls for proposals and their evaluation procedures for the main instrument of blue-sky research, the so-called "Projects of Collaborative Research". This activity was based on a bottom up approach allowing researchers to choose for any topic they prefer. In the case of initiating policy driven research instruments, such as national research programmes, the committees acted within the remits of their respective research areas. By now the SSH committee has participated in all stages of the life cycle of two finalised and two on-going national programmes, mostly meant for either social sciences or humanities with a possible mixed approach. Thematic areas of the national programmes were quite

specific, chosen by a special commission out of numerous suggestions by research communities due to their importance to the state and its society. The names of the national research programmes in SSH illustrate their specificity and national importance as expressed by two programmes in the humanities: "State and Nation: Heritage and Identity, and Modernity in Lithuania". As for the social sciences, the programmes differ in their thematic scope. "Social Challenges for the National Security" is narrower than "Welfare Society"[1].

One programme of a different type (no matter that is has the word *national* in its title) following the state priority of the Lithuanian studies is the "National Programme of the Lithuanian Studies". It could be placed in between freely chosen and prescribed thematic areas. It was limited from the point of view of the object rather than the topic of research and confined to the investigation of specific topics. The topics had to be related to the *"past and present of the state of Lithuania, its society and culture as well as the development and present state of the Lithuanian language and nation"* (2006: 2), as prescribed by "The Programme of the Research Priority of the Lithuanian Studies 2007-2008" (2006:), allowing researchers to investigate their specifically chosen topics within this area.[i]

The most relevant research funding instrument impact-wise at the Research Council of Lithuania is a national research programme. Despite research area specific programmes the overall description of the national programme as an instrument meant to be universal and equally suitable for all fields of research. Its most distinctive feature related to the impact of the programme as a whole is presented in its aim. National research programmes are meant *„to solve problems, crucial for the state and its society, with the help of research"* (Procedural description 2012: 2). Moreover, in the procedural description of the initiation of a national programme it is stated that *„the problem meant to be solved by the national programme should be such that it could be solved by Lithuanian researchers within a period of 3-7 years."* (Procedural description 2012: 3). The latter requirement implies that the problem has to be well-defined and concrete, a demand feasible exclusively for the natural and technical sciences. Social sciences and humanities, no matter that they comprise a wide range of fields and subfields from the point of view of their research objects, methods and approaches, cannot formulate any problem of social relevance that could be solved in such a short period of time. The titles of the SSH national programmes and their aims are clear manifestations

of a different, i.e. more broad, reflective and descriptive approach to the important issues of the society than a purely instrumental user-oriented problem-solution approach. The academic and societal outcomes of the SSH programmes need an ex-post evaluation but even a fast glance at the outcomes reveals the traditional academic result, i.e., an advancement of knowledge and its transfer in the form of academic publications and conferences. Rare attempts to provide recommendations and to influence political activities of the state institutions, mostly made by social scientists, cannot be seen as very effective or impactful.

Thus impact-oriented requirements of the national SSH programmes are hardly met by researchers as the impact is not yet an essential part of their research design. Awareness of the core evaluation criteria that include *"potential impact through the development, dissemination and use of project results"* (Procedural description 2012: 12) does not inspire researchers to devote their research to social challenges. The gap between SSH research communities and state institutions still exists, depriving the latter of the possibility to make research based political decisions. Direct societal impact of policy driven research due to its purely academic nature is also hardly visible and measurable except for the result dissemination activities and popularisation of the most prominent research. It can be stated that policy driven research instruments that prevail in the country do not provide satisfactory feedback to the policy itself.

COMPETITIVENESS OF THE SSH RESEARCH FUNDING INSTRUMENTS

Four problem oriented SSH national research programmes and two state priority programmes with object-limited research as compared to the only one instrument of blue-sky research provide a scale of possibilities for the Lithuanian SSH researchers to choose from. Their willingness to compete is reflected in the success rates of seven programmes calculated for all the calls of proposals of each finalised and on-going programme.

Type	Main area	Duration	Name	Success rate
National research programme	Humanities	2010 2013	"State and Nation: Heritage and Identity"	40,13 %
National research programme	Social Sciences	2010 2013	"Social Challenges for the National Security"	39,28 %
National research programme	Humanities	2017 2022	"Modernity in Lithuania"	33,87%
National research programme	Social Sciences	2015 2020	"Welfare Society"	12,83%
State programme	Humanities	2009 2015	"National Programme of the Lithuanian Studies"	46,28%
State programme	Humanities	2016 2024	"The State Research and Dissemination Programme of the Lithuanian Studies"	30,68%
Blue-sky research	Social Sciences and Humanities	N/A	Projects of Collaborative Research on Researchers' Initiative	26,62%

Table 1. Success rates of the policy-oriented programmes and blue-sky research.

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1   For more about the national programmes see https://www.lmt.lt/.

Success rates should be interpreted on the bases of the type and timing of the programmes. The main split between policy driven or state contracted research and blue-sky research (six programmes versus one) gives the ratio of 33, 85% to 26,62% in favour of blue-sky research as more preferred by researchers. However, one national programme „Welfare state" provides an exception as it has a comparatively low success rate and high competitiveness due to its broad thematic scope and openness for interdisciplinary approaches. Previous national research programmes were less popular in comparison with the present ones due to the fact that at the time of their initiation competitive and collaborative research was still in its infancy. On the bases of success rates of the above programmes supplemented by information provided by individual researchers it can be stated that blue-sky research or broad scope policy driven research is more preferred by the Lithuanian SSH community than specific agenda driven research. Needless to say that more competitive research is more promising quality-wise.

"NEED DRIVEN SSH RESEARCH"

All the above presented state contracted and policy driven SSH research instruments has a double purpose to promote academic outputs and impact on decision makers at the state institutions and broader society. Usually, research output and its possible impact are needed faster than project duration and the life cycle of a programme would allow. A state demand for prompt solutions in case of burning issues of national cyber security, informational wars, waste of food, refugee integration, to mention a few, caused appearance of a new instrument, the so-called "Need Driven Research". The new instrument was initiated on requests for specific applied research from the government, ministries and other state institutions. It was meant to be more flexible time-wise as the duration of a project was shortened up to 1-2 years and calls for proposals organised every year starting with 2015.

The major distinction of the "Need Driven Research" is the list of topics suggested by ministries or any other state institutions and approved by the committees of the Research Council of Lithuania as suitable for research and experimental development. The committees pay attention to all the evaluation criteria for the approval of the topics suggested, however, the most important criterion is the necessity for the research or experimental development to meet social challenges and to solve practical problems. A possibility to investigate a problem named by state institutions applying methods of research is one of the most frequent bottlenecks for the approval of the topic by the SSH committee. It is hard for the governmental institutions to formulate the topic of research and research questions in a scientific way. Moreover, sometimes they need a more modest outcome, such as a set of recommendations or a feasibility study, instead of a full-fledged research project.

Every topic suggested by the government, its ministries or any other state institutions has to be judged whether:

    a. it has a strategic value and importance for the state and society,

    b. the problem has to be solved urgently,

    c. its solution requires methodology of research or experimental development,

    d. the results of research will substantially contribute to the solution of the problem,

    e. the planned research does not overlap with any other previously financed research.

    (Procedural description 2016: 2)

The most valued outputs of the "Need Driven Research" are different if compared to the national or any other research programmes. Apart from publications, they include special applied outputs such as practical recommendations, new methods, evaluative methodologies, new technologies, networks, forecasts and scenarios of the activities planned, or anything else that can have, according to the contractor's view, a prompt impact for the state institutions and society at large. No matter that "Need Driven Research" is a general research policy instrument, SSH related topics prevail (71%) as they turn out to be of paramount importance for the state affairs, especially for its policies.

"Need Driven Research" as a research policy instrument cannot be easily compared with the other instruments from the point of view of its success rates as it is based on a two-step procedure. Pre-proposals are evaluated by a joint commission of social partners and experts from the Research Council of Lithuania, the most suitable proposals from the point of view of evaluation criteria (such as feasibility of the project, competences of the researchers, and socio-economical, political or any other impact) are suggested for a full proposal phase where they are re-evaluated by experts and the joint commission. Therefore there are two success rates: those of pre-proposals and full proposals. The pre-proposal success rate (17,28%) is fairly low in comparison with the success rates of other research policy instruments, however, it increases up to 33,85% for the full proposal submissions. In general, on the scale of research instruments ranging from free topic blue-sky research to a limited topic choice research instruments, „Need Driven Research" is situated at the far end of the research policy. In order to prove the value of the research stakeholders have to report to the Research Council implementation of its outputs.

Blue-sky research	Policy driven research programmes	Policy driven research programmes	Policy driven research
Projects of collaborative research on researchers' initiative	State programmes on Lithuanian studies	National research programmes	"Need Driven Research"

Table 2. The scale of research instruments from free to limited choice of topics.

The instrument of Need Driven Research is fairly new therefore hard to evaluate, nevertheless, it looks quite promising from the point of view of its societal impact of SSH research. Its main drawback is the same as in case of national programmes, i.e. top down approach to specific problems and their solution leaving SSH researchers with even less time and more stringent requirement for practical outputs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Impact-oriented research policy executed by the Research Council of Lithuania has its pluses and minuses. It is praiseworthy to promote the idea of mission-oriented and transformative research, to raise awareness among researchers and to support the culture of societal research impact. However, it is obvious that policy driven research instruments, especially of a general type, are not always suitable for the SSH research. Traditional impact (both academic and societal) assessment methods do not reveal multilateral impact of the SSH research that remains to be re-defined taking into account possible side effects and unintended consequences. Bottom up approaches, such as blue-sky research, could be a better alternative for society-oriented research provided its impact is conceived, defined and assessed in multiple ways. In any case, impact, especially societal impact, of the SSH research has not only to be carefully planned before made during the process of research but also identified, reflected and evaluated from a long-term perspective. No one could do it better than SSH researchers themselves. In spite of all highly appreciated attempts to serve the state and society, policy driven research instruments deprive SSH community of its blue-sky research as well as of a chance for uncertain but high-gain opportunities and a long-term impact on society that is hard to measure and to evaluate immediately (Nowotny 2016).

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Endnotes

i   The programmes presented here do not cover all the research policy instruments used at the Research Council of Lithuania. Seven programmes were chosen due to their repetative nature (all of them had multiple calls for proposals) and comparable state based call budgets. A few unique calls for proposals as well as programmes financed from the European structural funds were not taken into consideration.