



# **HSSH ASSESSMENT REPORT**

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This assessment of HSSH, five years after its founding, is based on a self-assessment, a site visit as well as panel interviews with HSSH leadership, its board, its staff, the affiliated researchers from City Centre Campus, the Vice-Rector and members of the university support services. The assessment should be viewed in light of a 'digital turn' across all fields of research and education as well as a concomitant focus on interdisciplinarity. The HSSH, with its emphasis on scholarship and training in digitalization and datafication as well as its role as a melting pot for disciplines across the City Centre Campus, is well positioned to serve this dual role. Overall, we found a vibrant community brought together by HSSH, particularly those whose work crosses between the disciplinary and the computational. We also found diverging visions about its identity as well as its future, split between reconciling the dual research and service cultures built by HSSH. We recommend that the HSSH builds on its current strengths and resources to spearhead transversal research, collaboration and services at the planned City Centre Cluster. We provide specific recommendations for the UH Board, the City Centre Faculties as well as the HSSH staff. For the Board, these include having the HSSH, as inter-lab, serve as a model for interdisciplinary research in other parts of the university. For the City Centre Faculties, the key recommendation is to retain and support HSSH as an integrative research-led hub for interdisciplinary research, methodology development and service provision. Finally, for the HSSH staff we recommend identifying strongholds of your present provision and research resources; developing methodology courses that can be integrated into the education of local disciplines, and furthering a communication strategy that highlights transversal research and services with both your core constituency as well as major university stakeholders.

## 2. TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE ASSESSMENT PANEL

According to the Terms of Reference for the present HSSH assessment, its purpose is to contribute to fulfil the overall *purpose* of the Research Assessment of the University of Helsinki:

- to reveal and confirm the quality and impact of research activities,
- to identify emerging and strong research areas, and
- to support renewal.

The *aim* of the assessment is to produce information that can be used

- for enhancing quality and supporting strategic decision-making at the University of Helsinki on unit, faculty, and university levels
- to advance multi- and interdisciplinary approaches in research conducted at the University of Helsinki, and
- to provide insights for the strategy process 2028–2030.

The purpose of this document is to provide an evaluation of the activities of the HSSH some five years after its founding. Thus the HSSH arose and gained a foothold in the City Centre Campus both as its own institutional unit and on the heels of this large research grant in their dedicated area of activity, allowing the network to be staffed with datafication project researchers and affiliated with representatives from the various research faculties and schools in the centre city: Education, Law, Arts, Theology, Social Sciences, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies as well as the Swedish School of Social Science.

The terms of reference describe how the assessment should cover the Institute's goals: the enhancement of interdisciplinary research, coordination and development of shared research infrastructures, strengthening of the methodological capacity and innovation across faculties, mobilizing research funding applications and strengthening of scientific and societal impact. They also relate the preference for concise, evaluative comments rather than description.

### 3. EVIDENCE RECEIVED

This report is based on evidence from a written report (the self-assessment), from meetings with the different stakeholder groups, and a site visit.

- The written report summarised the current context.
- The site visit lasted two days and included a visit to the institute's laboratory.
- The panel met with the following constituencies over the duration of the assessment visit: HSSH leadership; HSSH Board; HSSH staff; researchers from Centre Campus; Vice-Rector; university support services.

### 4. FINDINGS

#### 4.1. Background to HSSH

- Digital turn as key transformation
- Interdisciplinarity

The Helsinki Institute for the Social Sciences and Humanities (HSSH or HESSU) is a network organisation at the University of Helsinki whose aim is to bring together the social sciences and the humanities in the City Centre Campus through a combination of research, research service, and training and support especially in the area of computational and digital research methods.

The foundation and development of HSSH must be understood and assessed in view of two key transformations of university research and education since the 1990s. First, we have witnessed a digital turn across all fields of research and education, including university research and education. To conduct research and facilitate education increasingly presuppose and rely on the generation, analysis, sharing and storage of data, and on the existence of safe material infrastructures, and reliable software and services. So, universities around the world have established units to develop and support this digital turn both in terms of research on digitization and in terms of service provision.

Second, international research increasingly moves towards mission- and problem-based research tackling complex societal problems. These forms of research necessitate collaboration across diverse fields of expertise, thus accelerating research across often quite diverse disciplines and fields, including support structure to facilitate these forms of research.

In response to the pervasive trends towards digitization and interdisciplinarity, most research-intensive universities around the world have set up organizational units that

can support and advance relevant research, education and services. The HSSH is part of that process.

Thus, the research, research training and research service and support provided by the HSSH should be situated in the dynamics of the paradigmatic shifts in the current research environment.

## **4.2. Visions, identities and governance**

- Hybrid scholarly community
- Research and/or network organisation?
- Current and future visions

Each of the various faculties and research schools in the City Centre Campus makes use of the HSSH in different manners, some more intensively than others. In interviews with the researchers affiliated with the HSSH some mentioned how it became a home especially for scholars with a hybrid profile both disciplinary and computational in nature. It has facilitated their computational and digital research work and proposal-writing, individually or in teams, and also brought together the researchers more generally, forming an interdisciplinary community around these methodologies and approaches.

For those adjacent to or working outside of the computational arena, particularly according to interviews with the research management (i.e., deans) as well as research management support providers, the HSSH assumes a role typical of a network organisation, functioning as a service to existing disciplines, such as in the areas of data management as well as data ethics. It has held training events, bringing together disciplinary researchers interested in the nuts and bolts underlying their digital work. It has also assisted in setting up data-driven research, including assistance with methodological approaches as well as infrastructure.

These two 'visions' of the current state and future of the HSSH -- an interdisciplinary research community and/or a research resource organisation servicing disciplines -- lie at the heart of this evaluation. In the next sections we lay out the HSSH contributions to both its visions and also put forward a series of considerations about its future, emphasising the strengths of the hybrid identity it has managed to forge.

## **4.3. Quality and impact of research**

- Contribution to developing interdisciplinary research
- Mobilising research funding
- Generating research outputs (scientific publications, policy documents)

- Methodological development (epistemological and technical work building on synergies and overlaps between fields; transformative role of methodological development in knowledge production)

When judged by the relative brevity of its existence, the HSSH has been successful in merging the two sets of expectations. It has fostered a community and also produced and facilitated quality academic work. Of special note is that its catalyst grants have mobilised viable interdisciplinary networks and successful grant applications. The scholarly contributions made by the HSSH to methodological approaches in the computational social sciences and digital humanities should be highlighted. Overall, we found the quality of the scientific publications being well up to scholarly standards and the events and training calendar to be very well developed. The service provision has been of a high standard: the data management guides, management courses, ongoing preparation for campus wide research infrastructure plan and data policy implementation plan are excellent resources produced by the HSSH. AI training is also in the offing.

#### **4.4. Quality and impact of services**

- Provision of research infrastructure (equipment and computational facilities, data infrastructure, language models, laboratory, citizen barometer) and its use by projects
- Capacity development (methodological training and consultations, clinics, methodological assistance, leadership course, ethics)

In discussions across the various constituencies (HSSH staff, affiliated researchers, vice-rector, deans, research support services), we asked about the future, particularly how to allow the HSSH to thrive as a vibrant research community in itself and/or as a service provider. The discussions revolved around visions about its identity, its sustainability as well as its governance. These exchanges took place at a time when new organisational forms are under consideration in the university at large, particularly 'clusters' or collaboration fora that coordinate and develop resource infrastructures, foster interdisciplinarity and make visible inter- and intra-faculty research strengths.

The HSSH's strengths appear to lie in its mixed portfolio: a research-informed methodological mission, which serves as an interdisciplinary research incubator, substantively transformative for the disciplines but also field-building in itself through digital research infrastructure coordination, policy development, training and event organisation.

## **5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1. Identity - three-fold**

- Interdisciplinary incubation and support
- Methodological and research practice development and capacity-building
- Shared infrastructure

We identify the opportunity to highlight three aspects of HSSH's profile, which have to do with its core strengths: research-informed digital methodologies, interdisciplinary and hybrid scholarly support and shared infrastructure, including the laboratory but also the policy and training events, guides and services.

### **5.2. Funding options**

- Cluster call
- Mixed soft-funding research model (own research grants and fractional share of grants held by faculties)
- Mixed institutional model (central university to fund infrastructure, faculties to fund interface for specialist faculty support, soft external funding to fund own research and development projects)
- Similar model as original initiative, with faculties contributing to a shared transversal service

We emphasise the diversity of funding opportunities to be (further) developed from opportunities in the new cluster system and the network model of faculty contributions to mixes between soft and core funding.

### **5.3. Structure and governance**

- Alignment questions
- Opportunities for realignment

The divergent visions with respect to the identity or identities of the HSSH are reflected in the multiple discussions we had about governance. The current governance model for HSSH seems not to be aligned across UH and faculty leadership, HSSH leadership and staff, associated interdisciplinary researchers and research networks, and institutional research service.

Faculty leadership seem to prefer that HSSH focuses on being a specialist SSH transversal service.



HSSH leadership and staff seem to prefer a combined research and service unit in its own right, whose glue is digital methodology, and with a level of autonomy in developing its own research agenda and with funding and scientific outputs.

Interdisciplinary researchers and networks from different faculties would favour a network which offers seed money that can facilitate cross-engagement and, importantly, furthers legitimacy and offers a 'home' to interdisciplinary research and joint grant developments.

Institutional research services have a less clearly defined position, but possibly can see more prospects in HSSH as a specialist infrastructure and/or pool of research time, rather than general research support service, thus complementing the professional expertise in the general research services with domain-specific expertise that can support the implementation of faculty policies and provides technical and data infrastructure to their researchers.

## **5.4. Visibility and engagement**

- Visibility to university and faculty leadership
- Communication of impact across the relevant groups

Visibility to institutional leadership seems to be limited, with awareness of the existence, function and contribution of HSSH in clear need of improvement. There are opportunities for focused communication in the short term, as decisions are made about infrastructure and the organisation of the clusters, as well as in the long term, in line with strategic thinking across the City Centre Cluster and the University.

Communication of impact across the relevant groups also seems to have met variable success, with interdisciplinary researchers from the different faculties most clearly articulating the value of HSSH to their interests, careers and research. Monitoring and communicating impact and value for each of the key stakeholder groups can open up opportunities for further collaboration and support. The HSSH board is an evident venue for that, but there are also other stakeholders, such as the research committees and other faculty and professional services fora.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel recommends that the HSSH builds on its current strengths and resources to spearhead transversal research, collaboration and services at the planned City Centre Cluster. In order to fulfill that role, the HSSH should position itself as a seeded and well-formed research collaboration forum in its own right, making use of university cluster resources. It should serve as a coordinator and developer of digital and computational research infrastructure. For its research activities, it should rely on the university for its own researchers and affiliates as well as fractional contributions in disciplinary or cross-disciplinary bids that include methodological and infrastructural needs.

In order to capitalise on HSSH's research strengths and further the quality of SSH education at UH, HSSH staff should engage as teachers and mentors in methodology courses of relevant SSH disciplines.

With respect to governance, the panel recommends that Faculty leadership, HSSH leadership and representatives from associated researcher and research services align a governance structure that allows mutual communication with respect to research strategy, education and funding. At present, HSSH as a network organisation regularly meets with research management and service teams but is outside the meeting circle of the disciplinary faculties and research schools. Its inclusion in the governance of disciplinary research – be it through standing invitation or specifically within the collaboration forum structure – could serve to better foster interdisciplinary collaboration in the City Centre Campus and also make more practical the discussion of potential HSSH fractional contributions to grant bids.

### 6.1. Specific recommendations

- Recommendations to university leadership, faculties and HSSH

#### Recommendations to UH Board

- Develop HSSH as a laboratory of interdisciplinary research and research training united by methodological innovations.
- Apply insights from this 'inter-lab' to other parts of the university, which will help leverage the UH's purpose of interdisciplinary research.

#### Recommendation to Faculties

- Retain and support HSSH as an integrative research-led hub for interdisciplinary research, methodology development and service provision.

- Establish a sustained funding model for HSSH that allows for a stable research staff of three researchers.
- Use HSSH as a unifying glue in the university-wide transformation into three new clusters through leveraging university funding that catalyses interdisciplinary research.
- Integrate HSSH into the governance structure of the participating Faculties, e.g., through membership of faculty research boards.
- Capitalise on HSSH's capacities by integrating its staff members into relevant Faculty or Department methodology courses. Or, have HSSH staff develop methodology courses that are integrated into disciplinary curricula at department level.

### **Recommendation to HSSH**

- Identify strongholds of your present provision and research resources.
- Develop a sustained communication strategy with your core constituency and university stakeholders (leadership, researchers, students, admin.) and apply this strategy to communicate your resources.
- Work with faculties and departments to develop methodology courses that can be integrated into the education of local disciplines.
- Work with UH leadership to develop third-party funding models that align with UH-wide strategies.

# APPENDICES

- Programme of visit

## Appendix 1:

### Programme of visit

#### Arrivals

Kirsten Drotner (Sunday 27/4)

Richard Rogers (Monday 28/4) (note there will be a car picking you up from the airport)

Alis Oancea (present online) (note all times in Finnish time, GMT+2, i.e Monday start at 13:00 at UK)

#### Monday 28/4

15:00 -- 16:30	Introduction and meeting the HSSH staff
17: 00 -- 18:30	HSSH board members (possibly vice dean of research)
19:00	<i>Dinner</i>

#### Tuesday 29/4

8:15 – 9:15	Site visit to Inter-Lab (highlights from research)
9:30 – 10:15	Open slot for interviews with campus researchers
10:30 – 11:30	Meeting with Vice-Rector Anne Portaankorva

#### *Lunch*

13:00 – 14:00	University services: research support, data support
14:00 – 15:00	Panel meeting and some preliminary feedback
15:30	Departure to the airport