

# the humanities – speaking with one voice

“ We see this as an extremely promising development, creating a great opportunity for the humanities to develop joint research infrastructures and research co-operation. ”

The ERCH project, launched by an association of European research councils, is intended to create a strong international voice for humanities research within the European Research Area.

The humanities are closely associated with national heritage and identity, but can also contribute insights into broad issues of ethics, values, culture and gender – key issues for Europe’s progress towards a competitive and sustainable economy. ERCH will collect information about national practices and programmes, and will suggest possible joint research themes and infrastructure projects to be implemented through a future ERA-NET.

*This is a preparatory project. The consortium will use it to look for additional partners and to define the workplan for a full Coordination Action under the ERA-NET scheme.*

The EU’s Sixth Research Framework Programme supports research in the humanities as well as in science and technology – and such research is essential for understanding not only society, but also the societal transformations that are being brought about by developments in science and technology.

The ERCH partners point out that a successful society depends fundamentally on communication skills, cultural understanding and creative development – all of them in the province of the humanities. If we want to create a future that is sustainable socially and ethically as well as technologically and economically, we must look for insights from research in the humanities as well as advances in science, technology and engineering. In a real sense, the humanities are one of the foundations of the knowledge economy.

Humanities researchers are already collaborating with scientists in new ways – joint research on environment, food, health and welfare are notable examples. The interface

between information technology and art, such as in multimedia, is also a fertile ground for collaboration. Such interfaces offer huge potential for new ideas and new approaches of real economic importance.

## Ethics, values, culture

But the scope of the humanities ranges wider still. Such issues as ethical standards, values, culture and gender are widely debated at all levels, and academic research in these important areas requires support to ensure closer contact between researchers and society.

Parts of the humanities are still weak in cross-border co-operation. Europe has always had an outstanding tradition of research in the humanities but, unlike science and technology, these efforts have been largely confined within national borders. This is no great surprise since studies of language, culture and history have strong associations with individual nation states and are traditionally bound up with concepts of national heritage and identity. Change is in the air, however. The ERCH project originated from a 15-member European network of Research Councils in the humanities, which was formed in October 2002 to ensure that the humanities have a strong academic voice in the



## Specific support action

### Full title:

European network of research councils in the humanities

### Research field:

Humanities

### Coordinator:

Denmark: Danish Research Agency, Danish Research Council for the Humanities

### Partners:

- Ireland: Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS)
- Netherlands: Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, Council for the Humanities (NWO)

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11 months

### EC funding:

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### Project reference:

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European Research Area. The aim of this preliminary project is to prepare the ground for an ERA-NET that will develop a comparative approach to humanities research in order to transcend historical limitations and develop new Europe-wide research agendas.

The first step is to gather information from the partners on current research policies and programmes. This will be a major task since some countries group humanities with social sciences for funding purposes, and there are differences in the disciplines included under the humanities umbrella. ERCH members have already made an early start on this essential data gathering which will provide the basis for more concrete proposals for the subsequent ERA-NET. As a key network tool and a means to share the information collected, an ERCH website is being developed.

### Common infrastructure

The preliminary project will lay the grounds for a more structured co-operation. Through an exchange of information on best practice, the partners will improve their understanding of one another's administrative procedures and identify promising common research initiatives. The identification of common infrastructure needs will also be critical. Unlike the many European science facilities – such as the world-class centres for particle physics,

astronomy and molecular biology – Europe possesses very little in the way of collaborative research infrastructure for the humanities. The project sets out to remedy this. The aim is to support sharing, pooling or networking of existing national facilities and to develop new mechanisms. The project will work on new European facilities such as a clearing house to set standards for the transnational accessibility of research databases, and new databases with sufficient concentration of academic significance to have a European impact. These proposals will feed into plans for the subsequent ERA-NET.

The ERA-NET itself will aim to enhance coordination of research activities and explore possibilities for joint development of new research programmes. It will develop a general network infrastructure capable of generating new initiatives to address specific questions about Europe's fundamental values and cultures. These initiatives will encourage dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, support Europe's economic growth, and assist the integration into the Union of new Member States. The ERCH ERA-NET intends to become a dynamic partner in the development of the European Research Area, and to play a pioneering role in the construction of future Framework Programmes.