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On Excellence

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O n E x c e l l e n c e

Text by Tuomas Forsberg
Photo: Veikko Somerpuro

The stated mission of the Helsinki Collegium is to carry out high-level research in the humanities and social sciences. Given this key purpose, it is essential that in the international research assessment of the entire University of Helsinki in 2019 that focused on the past decade, the Collegium received the grade of “excellent” for both the quality of research and the research environment. As excellence ought to be recognised by others, it is important that what we say we are aligns with what we do.

So I would like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessors and all our former fellows who have contributed to this success.

We may, of course, ask how excellent is “excellent”. Something would be terribly wrong with the concept of an institute for advanced study if the Collegium were not recognized as a better research environment than teaching units and if the quality of the research environment did not translate into quality of research. However, following the academic good practice of doubt and self-criticism, there is no justification for resting on one’s laurels. Even excellence can be improved.

The Collegium received the grade “very good” in the assessment of societal impact. “Very good” is not a bad achievement but already literally a very good result. Yet, given the available resources, to what extent can we realistically improve our societal impact without also jeopardizing our excellence in research? Many institutes for advanced study worldwide have reckoned that the old idea of the “usefulness of useless research” is not sufficient. Accordingly, they have started to pay more attention to societal impact to meet the expectations or even demands of the authorities, funding bodies and sponsors.

The Collegium’s visibility and outreach have emerged both locally and internationally. For example, it has been active in social media, through blogs and in public events at the new Think Corner of the University of Helsinki. However, probably the best way for the Collegium to foster societal impact is by facilitating the activities of its researchers. Just as the research carried out at the Collegium is bottom-up by nature, so should its societal impact be. Given that Collegium researchers are exempt from major administrative and teaching duties, they can in fact address new topical issues much faster of their own initiative as well as find more time for societal interaction. Many researchers already know how they can reach out to the relevant audiences. In addition, some researchers are better positioned for societal interaction than others. Moreover, research and societal interaction are typically sequential, since impact is based on research that first has to be carried out. Therefore a kind of division of labour should apply to institutions. Given the diversity of fields and issues represented at the Collegium, it is not easy to identify a core audience other than those interested in knowing what is going on and what is new in academic research in the wide sense.

Societal impact, while definitely important, is difficult to measure reliably. In fact, attempts to do so, particularly when it affects funding directly, may lead to unintended consequences. As is well-known, measuring the societal impact of academic research is difficult because it may take a long time before the impact becomes visible, and it is often impossible to attribute the impact of scientific knowledge to particular research outcomes. A related question is whether we should reward research that could or should have had an impact, but has failed to have one. Politicians and other decision-makers still make choices on the



basis of their preferences and they may discard scientific evidence. What if we reward outcome, in other words research that has had impact, but for reasons that may have nothing to do with the quality of research? Scholars are expected to be active in the society and broaden their expertise beyond their own academic research. We should reward researchers for their societal impact based on their scholarly expertise, but it is very difficult to do so without rewarding them also for their societal impact that is based on mere civic activism. By the same token, there is no objective way of separating good impact from bad. And even if there were a clear definition of societal impact, it can remain a secret: some of the most significant instances of societal impact – when advice is given to key decision-makers – are not meant to be publicly acknowledged.

Societal impact should definitely be part of the academic ethos that guides our research. This should not imply that research should be evaluated in terms of its short-term goals or that the societal impact of research can be measured accurately. Moreover, there is no contradiction in claiming that we should pay attention to the societal impact of research, and that we still need places where that is not the primary concern. The more universities and research institutes are required to demonstrate their relevance by addressing immediate societal concerns defined in a top-down manner, the more important it becomes that at least some institutes can focus on basic, curiosity-driven research. //

Excellence at HCAS Recognized by the International Research Assessment

HCAS received the grade “excellent” for the scientific quality of its research as well as for its research environment in the international research assessment carried out in the entire university in 2018–19. The societal impact of the Collegium was graded “very good”.

The assessment comprised the years 2012–18, but the aim of the recommendations was future oriented. HCAS was assessed by the Humanities Panel chaired by Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, Prof. **Claire Warwick** (Durham University).

As the strengths of the Collegium, the panel highlighted our achievement of having built a top-class international research environment for innovative research. The panel acknowledged that the Collegium fellowships enable both Finnish and

international researchers representing different career stages to dedicate time to research within a supportive and interdisciplinary community. These strengths are essential for the production of high-quality academic output in both English and Finnish, such as monographs by leading publishers.

The development areas listed by the panel included tighter alignment of the priorities of the Collegium with the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, better succession planning to mitigate against disruptions caused by changes in personnel, enhanced communication channels to promote the Collegium and the research it fosters, and measures to promote the diversity of applications by nation, gender and economic background. Furthermore, the panel recommended that the University of Helsinki ensure appropriate administrative resources to enable the Collegium to fulfill its ambitions.

Recommendations of the HCAS Academic Advisory Board

In September 2019, HCAS hosted a visit by its international Academic Advisory Board members, Professor **Christine Helmer**, Professor **Ann Phoenix**, Professor **Morten Kyndrup** and Professor **Andres Kasekamp** (in absentia). Based on meetings during their visit as well as materials provided to them in advance, the AAB compiled a report on the current situation and possible future development of HCAS.

The AAB highlighted the Collegium’s central role as a unit promoting interdisciplinary and transgenerational research as well as internationalization of the University of Helsinki. They stressed that HCAS should maintain its identity as a separate institute of advanced study when the Helsinki Center for Social Sciences and Humanities (HSSH) is founded. The AAB also noted that there had been too many disruptions in the administrative staff of HCAS in the past and recommended long-term contracts for administrative personnel.

Due to its strong international reputation, the Collegium already attracts scholars of an international caliber. However, the AAB

proposed that the HCAS would target international fellows, especially senior scholars and scholars with children, more actively. If potential fellows knew more about the benefits of Finnish childcare and school systems for working parents, they might find HCAS even more attractive as a site of research. HCAS was recommended to aim at a composition of 75% international fellows as opposed to the current 50/50 balance between international and Finnish fellows, as this would likely facilitate better integration between national and international scholars. HCAS should also adopt a more ambitious strategy in connecting alumni to the Collegium and keep a better record of what the alumni achieve after their Collegium period.

In reference to the research assessment, the AAB pointed out that the societal impact of the Collegium need not be as immediate as in some other units, because the Collegium’s mission consists of generating an interdisciplinary context in which new ideas and research can germinate, rather than in its immediate societal impact.