There is a growing tendency for the government and policy makers to emphasise the importance of STEM subjects at the expense of humanities subjects. What do you think are some of the reasons for the decreased value placed on humanities research today?

To begin with, I would challenge that statement. At Trinity College Dublin, for instance, we continue to attract some of the best students, who go on to be enormously successful in a variety of fields. And we are not an anomaly; it’s really striking to see the proportion of leaders in the City of London who read arts and humanities degrees at Oxford. Here in Ireland, based on anecdotal evidence, I’m seeing a disproportionate amount of arts and humanities graduates becoming CEOs or leaders in whatever profession or industry they choose to enter. So we are clearly doing something right. Arts and humanities graduates are very marketable – they have good critical thinking skills and they are good at dealing with ambiguity. They usually have excellent communication skills, both written and verbal, and they are good at problem solving. All of these skills are highly prized in the market place.

Do you think governments can misunderstand the value of arts and humanities degrees, and what are the consequences of this?

I think sometimes they do. The vast majority of politicians – excluding Angela Merkel, of course – are actually arts and humanities graduates. So I think it’s rather ironic that those who have been trained in the arts and humanities seem not to value their own education.

To what extent is the impact of arts and humanities research undervalued in Ireland?

There is increasing pressure to measure everything, whether it is the scholarly or the wider economic or social value. When it comes to measuring research impact the traditional method has been through commercial datasets of citations, such as those offered by Thomson Reuters or Scopus. However these only capture about 25 per cent of the outputs from the arts and humanities. This is because instead of publishing in journals, we tend to publish most of our work in books or book chapters, which these datasets don’t cover. So because arts and humanities don’t feature in the datasets, some people might assume that this means the arts and humanities don’t matter. I take issue with that – the challenge is finding appropriate metrics that allow us to tell the arts and humanities story. Importantly, global rankings in Ireland show that arts and humanities outperform every other faculty area across every discipline in Ireland. We may not be able to use the traditional citation metrics that our colleagues in STEM use to measure value and impact, but the global rankings, which rank the arts and humanities more highly than any other disciplinary area, are very clear.

In 2014, Horizon 2020 fully integrated social sciences and humanities into projects funded under its Societal Challenges and Industrial Leadership priorities. Is this a good thing for arts and humanities research?

First, I would say that it is utterly essential for humanities researchers to be fully integrated across the whole spectrum of societal challenges or these major human-centred problems will never be successfully addressed. I was delighted to find out that this was what Horizon 2020 wanted to do – at least, in theory. However, my concern is that it has not been translated into reality. There seems to be a fundamental disconnect between rhetoric and practice. I am not blaming anyone – on one hand, arts and humanities researchers tend to work individually and they are not used to more collaborative and interdisciplinary research. Meanwhile, among colleagues in STEM and the health sciences, there tends to be a practice of tokenism when it comes to working with arts and humanities.
researchers. These are some cultural issues within the system that we must grapple with.

So you are saying that social sciences and humanities have yet to be successfully integrated within Horizon 2020 projects?

Yes. At a systemic level, the European Commission is full of good intentions – but in practice it doesn’t really know how to frame calls or evaluate proposals that are deeply interdisciplinary. If the Commission really is committed to full integration, it must put its money where its mouth is and fund integrative proposals. My sense is that we have a long way to go in this regard. It is very disappointing to see only a small number of arts and humanities projects being funded at a high level. Predictably, the money is going to the social sciences, not to the arts and humanities, and I think that we as a community need to take some responsibility for this. At the same time, the Commission needs to ask how we can change this.

What role can humanities researchers play in addressing grand societal challenges in Europe?

Humanities researchers across Europe have something very important to say about all of the great societal challenges, whether it’s around health and wellbeing or security and technology. For example, we have a medical humanities programme here at Trinity – and some of the most innovative and creative work happens when poets get together with our medical practitioners. Also, it’s very clear that technology is marching on – but what’s often missing from debates are societal aspects, from issues of privacy to creating technologies that drive positive values and promote the greater good. Arts and humanities have a very powerful voice in any discussion about digital issues.

Why do you think this powerful voice is sometimes underplayed? How can we ensure that arts and humanities voices are more widely heard?

I think these insights are so implicit to our DNA that their value is taken for granted and their potential to contribute to transformational change is being missed. While the arts and humanities have a responsibility to make this much more explicit, I would like to see greater disciplinary balance at the Horizon 2020 level that would enable the arts and humanities to be fully integrated in these discussions. I would also like to see increased funding for fundamental research in all disciplines.

Are there any major challenges when it comes to forging successful collaborations between academics from arts and science backgrounds?

I do a lot of work with computer scientists here at Trinity but, admittedly, it can be hard to do truly interdisciplinary work because you need a common language – which we often don’t have. I’m not underestimating the challenges of interdisciplinary work; it’s hard but it can be done. For instance, it would be easier for the technologists to go marching off rather than deal with the concerns of ethicists or philosophers who ask tough questions like: ‘what is the societal impact of that particular technology?’

However, if we accept that the majority of the world’s problems are caused by humans, then humans play a key role in their solution – and that’s why the arts and humanities are so fundamentally important. When interdisciplinary research collaborations are framed on equal terms from the outset they have a much better chance of success.

To what extent would you say that there is still a ‘two cultures model’ present in European universities today, with the humanities and sciences pitted against each other?

I’d like to think that’s changing. Many of the great concerns we have are shared by colleagues across different disciplines – we all have similar challenges, concerns and aspirations. In fact, where I see much more of a divide is between basic, fundamental research and applied research that must have immediate economic impact. I don’t necessarily see a division between disciplines because I think researchers from different backgrounds actually have an awful lot in common. We want to educate outstanding students that make a contribution to society and we want to do original research that makes a difference.