Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers

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Beyond borders: Examining the role of national learned societies in the social sciences and humanities

Elina Late [1*], Raf Guns [2], Janne Pölönen [3], Jadranka Stojanovski [4], Mimi Urbanc [5], and Michael Ochsner [6]

[1]Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

[2]Centre for R&D Monitoring, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, Antwerpen, Belgium

[3]Publication Forum, Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, Helsinki, Finland

[4]University of Zadar, Zadar, Croatia

[5]Anton Melik Geographical Institute, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia

[6]FORS, Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

ORCID:
E. Late: 0000-0002-3232-1365
R. Guns: 0000-0003-3129-0330
J. Pölönen: 0000-0003-1649-0879
J. Stojanovski: 0000-0001-7399-522X
M. Urbanc: 0000-0001-8394-9892
M. Ochsner: 0000-0002-1758-9590

*Corresponding author: Elina Late, Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere University, Kalevantie 4, 33100 Tampere, Finland.
E-mail: elina.late@tuni.fi

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the status of national learned societies in social sciences and humanities (SSH) in Europe. Previous research shows that learned societies serve diverse roles in higher education and suggests that national societies come under pressure given different developments, such as internationalization or open science adoption. We investigate a comprehensive range of aspects within national learned societies: primary goals, activities, internationalization, organization, funding, membership, and recent changes, addressing potential pressures arising from them. Using a cross-national survey involving 194 learned societies across eight European countries, we study: (a) do the previous findings from individual countries or small selections of national societies hold for a broad range of learned societies in SSH across Europe, and (b) are national learned societies coming under pressure due to internationalization and commercialization processes? Our findings confirm previous results from single countries and single disciplines and expand them as our results show that national learned societies in SSH play an important role in Europe in promoting multilingualism in science, collaborating with many stakeholders, and fostering interdisciplinarity. Contrary to previous research, most SSH societies in our study have not undergone significant changes in the past 5 years, challenging expectations of their declining role.

Keywords: scholarly societies, scientific associations, scientific societies

INTRODUCTION

While there is not a precise, universally accepted definition for a learned society nor a strict set of criteria that organizations must meet to be labelled as such, it can generally be understood as an association comprising scholars, experts, professionals, and citizens with a fundamental mission to advance and disseminate research-based knowledge in a specific scholarly field, discipline, or subject area (Hopkins, 2011). Typically, learned societies operate as non-profit organizations (Brown, 2016), serving as pivotal centres for collaboration, the dissemination of research, and the promotion of excellence within their respective domains. Most

scholars actively engage with these societies by publishing in their journals and participating in their conferences (Late et al., 2022a; Roscoe, 2022).

For two decades, discussions have not painted a bright future for learned societies, primarily those of national scope. For example, The UNESCO World Report Towards Knowledge Societies published in 2005 stated that 'learned societies are losing their national character and are being assimilated into international organisations' (UNESCO, 2005). Similarly, Delicado et al. (2014) argued that national learned societies are playing a diminishing role in producing and disseminating knowledge as, for example, D international academic journals have gained greater relevance. In addition, earlier studies (Korkeamäki et al., 2019; Roscoe, 2022) have revealed that many societies have concerns regarding the attrition of their membership.

This trend raises concerns, especially within the social sciences and humanities (SSH) disciplines, where national learned societies are vital in knowledge dissemination. Research within these fields often strongly emphasizes national context, delving into specific communities and cultures. Within such research domains, national societies provide important venues for knowledge dissemination and networking, reaching diverse audiences within academia and beyond (Hewitt et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2011). The recent DIAMAS study shows that institutional publishers and/or service providers (IPSPs), including also learned societies or associations, publish most often in social sciences (55%) and/or humanities (54%), while STEM disciplines are mentioned less often (12%–27%) (Armengou et al., 2023). Similarly, in Finland, 80% of the journals and books published by Finnish learned societies belong to SSH disciplines (Late et al., 2020).

However, discussions regarding the fate of national learned societies have not systematically considered the disciplinary differences in knowledge production and audience structures. To the best of our knowledge, cross-national studies in Europe on this matter are entirely lacking. The current research investigates the situation of European national learned societies in SSH based on cross-country survey data. We, therefore, address two broad research questions:

- Do the previous findings from individual countries or small selections of societies hold for a broad range of national learned societies in SSH across Europe?
- Are national learned societies facing increasing pressure due to internationalization and commercialization processes?

In particular, we address the following specific questions:

1. What are the main goals of national learned societies in SSH, and how do societies carry out their activities related with publishing, research and organization of events?
2. Can we identify an internationalization of national societies, or are they still locally grounded?
3. How do national societies organize and fund their activities?
4. Who are the members of the societies, and how do they benefit from their membership?
5. Are national societies coming under pressure? Are they experiencing changes in their activities, member loss, or financial constraints?

Key points

- Learned societies in social sciences and humanities, while being bottom-up researcher communities mostly with little funding, take on various goals and activities.
- Learned societies promote multilingualism in scholarly communication and rely more on government publishing subsidies than income from journal subscriptions.
- Learned societies collaborate with many stakeholders nationally and internationally and act as intermediaries in the innovation process and knowledge dissemination.
- Most learned societies report stable operations, with plans for new types of digital events, publications, and networking and collaboration possibilities.

The findings of this study bridge a crucial gap in our comprehension of the role played by national learned societies in SSH. They shed light on how these societies foster research excellence, tackle societal challenges, and underscore their enduring significance within an ever-evolving academic landscape. The manuscript is structured as follows: first, we will provide a brief literature review of recent studies focusing on learned societies. Following that, we will describe our research methods, including data collection and analysis and present our empirical findings. The paper concludes with a discussion and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Learned societies may also be referred to as scientific or academic societies or associations (Bennett, 2013; Delicado et al., 2014; Waltham, 2010). Naming practices vary among different countries and languages, and the use of various terms may also be regulated by the laws of the country in question. Delicado et al. (2014) distinguish three groups of learned societies according to the focus of their activities: scientific societies, professional associations of scientists, and science dissemination associations. Most societies fall into the first group, aiming to advance a specific scientific discipline, with members mainly from academia. The second group promotes the professional interest of the members, often certifying their competencies. The third group aims to improve public understanding of science, attracting science enthusiasts as members. However, many societies assume varying and overlapping roles (Waltham, 2008). This

paper uses the term learned society to encompass all such organizations.

The history of learned societies dates back to the 17th century when the Royal Society of London and the Parisian Académie des sciences were founded. Later, scientific academies and societies were established throughout Europe, reaching their zenith in the late 20th century (Lilja, 2012; McClellan, 1985). To the best of our knowledge, there are no official figures on the number of these organizations worldwide, but it is estimated that there are about 9000 learned societies across Europe (Late & Pölönen, 2021).

Given their importance to academia and their long history, it is surprising how little is known about learned societies. Studies conducted after 2000 have primarily focused on a limited group of societies (e.g., ACLS, 2017; Bennett, 2013; Benyon, 2009; Benyon & David, 2008; Hewitt et al., 2017; Waltham, 2010), individual societies (Hopkins, 2011; McCarthy & Rands, 2013), or societies in specific countries (Delicado et al., 2014; Hewitt et al., 2017; Korkeamäki et al., 2019).

Mission and activities

The existing literature identifies numerous functions of contemporary learned societies that are important to the scholarly community, and which research-performing organizations cannot solely fulfil. For example, Hopkins (2011) pointed out that learned societies serve as a shared nexus for researchers working in different organizations and geographical areas. Similarly, learned societies have been described as research networks (McCarthy & Rands, 2013) and informal forums for the scientific community, whose activities are not bound by politics or the policies of universities and research institutes (Korkeamäki et al., 2019).

Learned societies engage in various internal and external activities to provide benefits and services to their members and community, promoting their respective disciplines (Delicado et al., 2014; Hewitt et al., 2017). According to Hewitt et al. (2017), social science societies promote disciplines by hosting conferences, creating networking opportunities, participating in higher education, supporting early-career scholars, funding research, and granting prizes and awards. These activities extend to providing public benefits, including influencing policies and practices, and facilitating various aspects of research and education, such as international outreach, accreditation and professional development, schools' outreach and education, and media and public engagement (Hewitt et al., 2017).

The publication of scholarly outputs—in particular journals and books as well as critical editions—has traditionally been an integral part of the activities of learned societies. According to the DIAMAS study, private not-for-profit organizations (charities, foundations, learned societies, or associations) publish mostly OA journals (93%), conference outputs (81%), non-standard research output (73%), and grey literature (66%). Representation of OA books is in line with the average of all types of institutional publishers taking part in the study (58%) (Armengou et al., 2023). Still, the commercialization of academic publishing has weakened their role as publishers of scientific journals after the Second World War (Fyfe, 2022; Meadows, 1974). Indeed, the migration of journals from learned societies to large commercial publishers is noticeable (ACLS, 2017; Monitoring the transition to open access, 2015). In recent decades, some learned societies have collaborated with commercial entities in their transition to digital publishing (Larivière et al., 2015). Journal sales models have significantly favoured larger publishers due to the appeal of 'big deals' (Nicholas et al., 2005) and led many society publishers to partner with big publishing houses (Ware, 2008). Still, according to Ware and Mabe (2015), 30% of journals in the Journal Citation Reports database were published by societies. Some of them, such as large and prestigious western societies, benefited from commercializing academic publishing and have become important players in this domain. Nevertheless, the differences in publishing practices between SSH and STEM are significant. Whereas STEM publishing is focused on international journals, SSH use more scattered publishing venues, including national forums and monographs (Hicks, 2004; Nederhof, 2006).

According to Late et al. (2020), 70% of Finnish journals are published by societies, showing their significant presence in national scholarly publishing. The society journals in Finland focus heavily on SSH. This may be attributed, among other factors, to the small language area concerned and limited opportunities for commercial publishers to make profits (Steinberg, 2015). Nevertheless, Delicado et al. (2014) claim that journals published (and conferences organized) by national societies have primarily evolved into platforms for the socialization and training of young practitioners, facilitating the generation of new knowledge and the accumulation of scientific capital. They also point out that many Portuguese societies have shifted away from publishing peer reviewed journals and have turned to other types of publications that attract wider audiences. However, Delicado et al. (2014) do not discuss the disciplinary differences in society publishing. Yet, publishing remains a significant source of revenue for some learned societies. In the United Kingdom, for example, publishing accounts for 26% of the total revenue of the societies (ACLS, 2017; Monitoring the transition to open access, 2015). The importance of subsidies for publishing as a source of income has also been demonstrated in Finnish societies (Korkeamäki et al., 2019).

Organizing or hosting national and international conferences and other scholarly events where members and other experts can share their research findings, exchange ideas, and collaborate is a routine practice for numerous learned societies. According to Hewitt et al. (2017), many of the conferences organized by UK social science societies rank among the most significant scholarly gatherings on a global scale. In addition, societies play an important role in organizing local events that facilitate networking among peers. Delicado et al. (2014) state that conferences foster community by enabling colleagues to meet in person and exchange tacit and unofficial information.

Learned societies typically do not carry out research themselves. Instead, they support research carried out by universities and research institutes (Delicado et al., 2014; Korkeamäki

et al., 2019). Some learned societies actively participate in activities such as data collection, providing research funding, and maintaining local libraries (Korkeamäki et al., 2019). Moreover, these societies contribute to the professional development of early career researchers by granting awards, offering research and travel grants, and facilitating internships. They also provide education, guidelines and recommendations, promote equity, diversity, and inclusivity principles, and advocate for research ethics, sustainability, and industry support (Delicado et al., 2014; Hewitt et al., 2017; Korkeamäki et al., 2019; Late et al., 2022b).

Organization, membership, and funding

As organizations, learned societies vary widely in size and activities but share the basic characteristics of mutual organizations operating for the benefit of their members (Hewitt et al., 2017). Their membership includes researchers, other academics, professionals, citizen scientists, or organizations (Conceição, 2020; Hewitt et al., 2017; Korkeamäki et al., 2019). Members are attracted by membership privileges, such as the opportunity to participate in events, apply for grants and receive publication discounts (Korkeamäki et al., 2019). According to Roscoe (2020, 2022), members highly value societies' networking possibilities. However, learned societies do not exist solely for their members; they also serve the broader scholarly community and the public (Hardaker, 2018; Hopkins, 2011). Learned societies typically fall under non-profit civil society organizations, sustaining themselves through subsidies or government funding, as Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005) noted. As detailed by Korkeamäki et al. (2019), their income sources encompass a diverse range, including membership fees, publishing subsidies, journal subscriptions, and grants. Consequently, the most financially endowed societies can employ professional staff, whereas smaller societies often depend on volunteer labour contributions (Korkeamäki et al., 2019). Indeed, Benyon (2009) emphasizes the importance of collaboration between the UK social science societies and umbrella organizations to foster knowledge transfer and public engagement.

Challenges to learned societies

Currently, learned societies face pressures from two significant trends. On the one hand, there is a substantial push towards the internationalization of research, which some argue diminishes the significance of local learned society memberships (Delicado et al., 2014). On the other hand, changes in the publication landscape threaten both these societies' income streams and membership bases. The growing concentration of ownership of journals in a few large companies and prevailing subscription models forced societies to cooperate with large publishers. Moreover, the open access (OA) movement leads to a situation where access to a society journal no longer serves as a compelling incentive for membership (Fyfe, 2022; Hewitt et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2005). Yet, in certain countries, learned societies still maintain significant control over the national journal landscape, especially in SSH (Late et al., 2020) and play pivotal roles beyond journal publication and conference organization (Delicado et al., 2014; Hewitt et al., 2017; Korkeamäki et al., 2019). According to Bennett (2013), learned societies in the sciences have been able to digitalise their publishing, whereas societies in the humanities are following in their footsteps. Bennett calls for governmental support for societies that do not have the skills or the resources to invest in digital infrastructure (Bennett, 2013).

The evidence for both assertions—pressure on learned societies due to internationalization and shifts in the publication landscape, as well as the diverse functions they undertake in academia—is often drawn from studies focused on specific national contexts or limited disciplines. The aim of this paper is to paint a more comprehensive picture of the state of national learned societies in the social sciences and humanities across Europe by focusing on their goals and activities, finances, membership, and possible changes.

RESEARCH METHODS

To address our research questions—namely, whether the prior findings exhibit broader relevance within learned societies in SSH across Europe and whether current developments put learned societies in SSH under pressure—we conducted a survey encompassing learned societies in SSH across seven European countries. The survey design was adapted from the one employed in Finland by Korkeamäki et al. (2019) to the international context within the COST Action CA-15137 'European Network for Research Evaluation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (ENRESSH)'. This resulted in an improved questionnaire in English. The research design followed five steps: selection of participating countries, identification of learned societies in SSH in each country, elaboration of variables and subsequent questionnaire, survey dissemination, data collection, and finally, data analysis.

Selection of participating countries and identification of learned societies

The study is based on two survey datasets (Late et al. 2023a; Late et al., 2023b). The first dataset was collected in Finland from Finnish learned societies in 2019. Korkeamäki et al. (2019) reported the survey results covering all disciplines. We extracted responses from societies representing SSH fields from the Finnish dataset for further analysis. The extracted dataset contains responses from 80 individual societies.

To investigate the situation of learned societies in SSH across Europe, we fielded a survey in spring 2020 based on the Finnish survey mentioned above to learned societies in seven European countries: Belgium (BE), Croatia (HR), Lithuania (LT), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Switzerland (CH), and the United Kingdom (UK). The idea was not only to achieve a comprehensive geographical coverage but also to include countries with diverse intellectual traditions and social, cultural, and economic situations

to reach a broader perspective on national learned societies in Europe.

The criteria for selecting learned societies within each country are primarily based on a basic requirement: that these national learned societies operate, either exclusively or in part, within SSH fields and contribute to the research in these fields. We developed a list of learned societies for each participating country. The process of identifying learned societies in SSH differed across countries, ranging from using the national register of learned societies (HR), the national business register (SI), umbrella organizations of learned societies (FI, CH, and UK), and desktop research, networks, and a combination of different smaller umbrella organizations (BE, LT, PT). The survey targeted administrative personnel (e.g., directors of the societies) from the learned societies. One person from each society was invited. This procedure led to a list of 343 learned societies in the seven countries (see Table 2). Out of the 343 invited learned societies, 114 societies responded to the survey. For this study, the two datasets, from Finland and the seven other European countries, have been merged, comprising responses from 194 national learned societies. Note that the aim of the study is not to identify national specificities or to compare situations across countries but to investigate whether the results stemming from national studies holds in general within a diverse sample of European learned societies. Comparisons across countries would need a large sample of societies in each country.

Variables and questionnaire

Research data were collected via an online questionnaire of 48 closed and 16 open questions distributed among learned societies in seven countries in the spring of 2020. The questionnaire was available in English. After the first invitation, two reminders were sent to those societies that had not yet answered the survey. The respondents were informed about the purpose of data collection and the use of the data. A link to the privacy notice was included in the invitation. Personal information (such as participant name) was not collected.

The questionnaire was designed to collect data about various activities and organization practices of national learned societies to get an overall picture of European national learned societies. Variables analysed in this paper are presented in Table 1. The questionnaire also included other variables concerning, for example, open science activities of the societies that were not analysed in this study due to space restrictions. Our aim here is to describe the activities and organization of the national societies in Europe, including several countries that earlier research has not yet covered.

Since the Finnish questionnaire differed slightly from the international questionnaire, three variables had to be re-coded into comparable categories. First, disciplines were coded to humanities, social sciences, humanities and social sciences and interdisciplinary (including both STEM and SSH). Second, categories for a language of publications were re-coded to societies

TABLE 1 Variables used in the online survey.

Topics	Variables
Descriptive information	Country of the society Promoted discipline of the society: humanities, social sciences, both humanities and social sciences, and interdisciplinary
Goals and activities	Main goals: Promoting research in general, Promoting a particular scholarly discipline, Fostering the development of a particular group of professionals, Fostering the development of a particular group of amateurs/citizens, Other (open question) Area of operation: Internationally, nationally, regionally Activities in organizing events: having this activity (yes/no), number of different types of events, organizing national/international events Publishing activity: having this activity (yes/no), number of different types of publications, language of publications Research activity: having this activity (yes/no), occurrence of different types of research activities, Other research activities (open question)
Stakeholders and collaboration	Type of collaboration with other national learned societies Type of collaboration with other international learned societies Other collaboration organizations
Organization and finances of learned societies	Does the society have employees Paid/voluntary work: Does society pay fees or compensation for work, Number of paid FTE, has the number of paid employees changed during the last 5 years, Share of voluntary work Yearly budget of the society (2018/2019) Main sources of revenue
Members and membership	Types of members (individual, organizations), Number of individual/organizational members, Recruiting new members, Means of recruitment Annual membership fee (2018/2019) Member benefits
Changes in activities, membership, and finances	Has the society seen changes in the last 5 years in the: Number of organized events, number of scholarly publications, number of other publications, research activity, number of members, society finances What other changes have taken place in publishing activities? (Open question) What other changes have taken place in society finances? (Open question) Does society intend to launch new forms of operating? (yes/no) What kind of forms of operating do you intend to launch? (open question)

publishing monolingually and multilingually. Finally, budgets and membership fees in the local currencies were converted to Euro based on the exchange rate as of 1st December 2020.

Data analysis

In a first step, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the variables relevant to our research questions, including frequencies, percentages, and means. We then also conducted analyses to assess the relationships between different variables. Cross-tabulations and comparing means were used to check differences between disciplines (humanities, social sciences, SSH, multidisciplinary) concerning society activities, publishing languages, organization and finances, members and membership and changes in activities. We also investigated whether taking on different activities is related to societies' finances (share of voluntary work, budget) or the number of members. Finally, we studied the correlations between society budgets and number of members. It is important to note that our sample does not consist of randomly selected participants; instead, we invited all known learned societies to participate. Therefore, we opted not to perform statistical significance testing. To control for possible biases caused by the overrepresentation of Finnish societies in our dataset, we checked for differences between Finland and other countries. We report the differences we found.

To provide insights into societies' practices beyond the readymade categories we derived from previous studies, we implemented a series of open-ended questions to give societies the opportunity to comment in detail. To analyse this data, content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was applied to categorize this qualitative data. First, responses were read to get familiar with the contents. Next, we identified and defined general data-driven categories to categorize each response. Subsequently, we revisited the responses, adding new categories as necessary and ensuring that all responses were appropriately assigned to the designated categories. Finally, we checked the number of responses in each category to examine their prevalence across the data. Quotations were selected from the data to illustrate the findings. If needed, the quotations were translated into English.

RESULTS

The data consists of responses from 194 learned societies, which amounts to an overall response rate of 37%. Each respondent represents a unique learned society. The number of identified societies, responses, and response rates vary across countries (see Table 2) due to each country's different organization of learned societies. For example, in Switzerland, most learned societies are organized under the Swiss Academies and in Finland, under the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies. In other countries, multiple umbrella organizations exist. The survey covered a large part of learned societies in Finland, Switzerland, and Croatia, whereas it was more challenging to identify the learned societies in the other countries. For example, in the United Kingdom, only societies belonging to the Academy of Social Sciences were invited. The response rates also varied dramatically across countries, ranging from 13% (Portugal) to 77% (Lithuania). However, the overall response rate (37%) is higher than expected, as a 25% response rate is typically considered satisfactory for academic surveys where response rates are often low (see, e.g., Cardoso et al., 2013; Ochsner et al., 2014).

The majority of societies represent humanities ($n = 70$, 36%), followed by social sciences ($n = 47$, 24%) and SSH (i.e., both humanities and social sciences, $n = 44$, 23%). Finally, 17% ($n = 33$) are interdisciplinary, representing SSH and other fields, such as medical or natural sciences (Fig. 1).

The distribution of disciplines differs across countries. In Belgium, Croatia, and Slovenia, more than half of the societies represent humanities, while in the United Kingdom, 70% of the societies represent social sciences (since we targeted the roof organization of learned societies in social sciences). A third of the societies from Finland represent both the social sciences and humanities. Since there is limited information about the number of societies in different disciplines and countries (Late &

TABLE 2 The country and response rate of respondent societies.

Country	Number of identified societies	Number of responses	Share of responses ($n = 194$) %	Response rate %*
Belgium	43	11	6	26
Croatia	52	26	13	50
Finland	181	80	41	41
Lithuania	22	17	9	77
Portugal	54	7	4	13
Slovenia	44	12	6	27
Switzerland	83	31	16	37
United Kingdom	45	10	5	22
Total	524	194	100	37

* Based on the number of identified learned societies. The total number of invitations sent was 524.

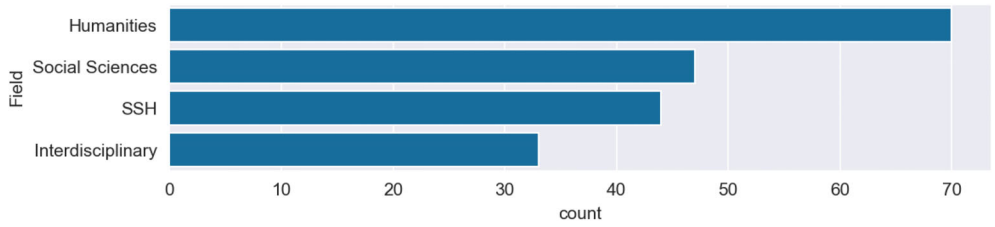

FIGURE 1 Number of societies representing fields of science ($n = 194$).

Pölönen, 2021), it is impossible to position our sample within the general situation of learned societies. Nevertheless, our data contains responses from different disciplines within SSH, making it a versatile dataset for investigating the situation of learned societies in SSH in Europe.

Goals and activities

The questionnaire contained four predefined goals the respondents could choose in an all-that-apply format plus an 'other' option where they could write down their own goals. Promoting a particular scholarly discipline was the responding societies' primary goal ($n = 154$, 79%). The second most common goal ($n = 63$, 32%) was fostering the development of a particular group of professionals or a specific profession. Promoting research in general ($n = 32$, 17%) and encouraging the development of a particular group of amateurs/citizens interested in science ($n = 22$, 11%) were indicated less frequently as goals. More than a quarter ($n = 51$, 26%) of the societies selected more than one goal for their activities, with the most common combination being promoting a particular scholarly discipline and fostering the development of a particular group of professionals or a particular profession ($n = 27$, 14% of the societies). The open answer was used only four times to provide more details for the selected options. One society mentioned influencing policy-making as an additional goal, while another saw promoting science, literature, and art as its goal, emphasizing that literature and art go beyond research.

Most societies operate nationally ($n = 165$, 85%), with almost half ($n = 91$, 46%) also operating internationally. Operating regionally (i.e., at the sub-national level) was less common ($n = 23$, 12%).

Regarding activities, we distinguish between three main kinds of activities for learned societies: organization of events, publishing, and contributing to research. While almost all societies engage in organizing events and, to a slightly lesser extent, publications, only about one in three carry out research activities themselves (Fig. 2). This suggests that many societies mainly play a role in enabling, supporting, and communicating research rather than engaging in research itself. We now discuss each of these three activity types in more detail.

Most societies ($n = 181$, 95%) were active in organizing scholarly events. Out of those that organized events, approximately two-thirds arranged at least one scholarly conference ($n = 119$, 66%) and/or scholarly seminar ($n = 108$, 60%) in the year preceding the survey. By scholarly conferences, we mean events with an open call for participation, whereas speakers for the scholarly seminars are invited and are more informal. More than half ($n = 99$, 55%) arranged at least one scholarly event not falling under either of the categories. Furthermore, most ($n = 139$, 77%) of the 181 societies that did organize at least one event reported organizing mainly national events. However, over a third ($n = 69$, 38%) also hosted international events and a quarter ($n = 43$, 24%) organized regional events.

Most societies ($n = 164$, 86%) were active in publishing. Finnish societies were more likely to be engaged in publishing than societies in other countries (93% vs. 82%, respectively). Although societies publish different types of publications, publishing is mainly focused on scholarly journals (Fig. 3). Among those that reported a publishing activity, two-thirds ($n = 105$, 64%) published at least one peer-reviewed journal last year, and about 40% published at least one book series, report, or policy brief. Other publication types were conference proceedings ($n = 28$, 31%), monographs ($n = 36$, 22%), and non-peer-reviewed journals ($n = 30$, 18%).

Our data shows societies most commonly publish multilingually (Fig. 4). More than 60% ($n = 101$) of societies use multiple languages in their publications, including English and national languages. Less than 10% ($n = 12$) publish multilingually but do not include English. About a third ($n = 51$, 31%) of societies publish

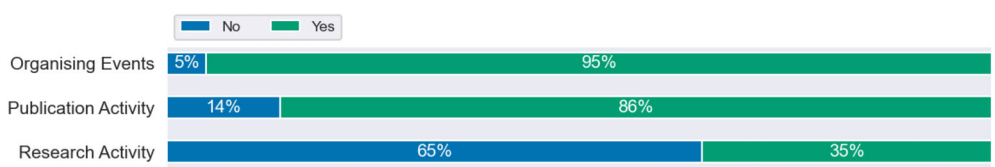

FIGURE 2 Number of societies participating in the major activities, $n = 194$.

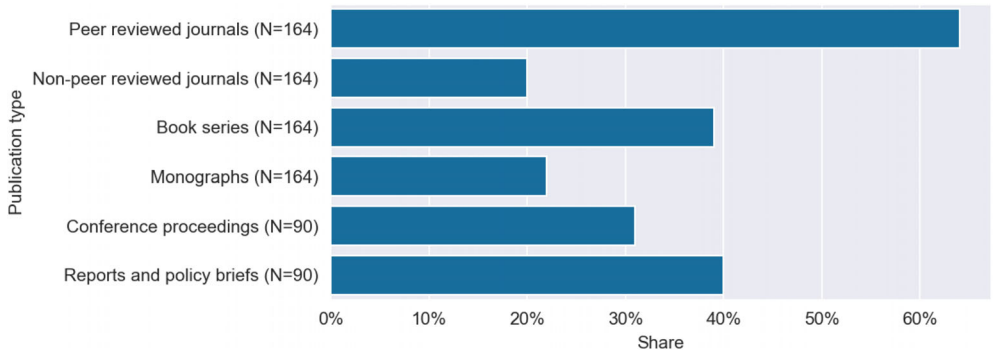

FIGURE 3 Share of societies publishing at least one peer-reviewed journal, non-peer-reviewed journal, book series, or monograph in 2018 (Finland) and 2019 (other countries) $n = 164$. Share of societies publishing at least one report or policy brief, conference proceedings in 2019 (other countries) $n = 90$.

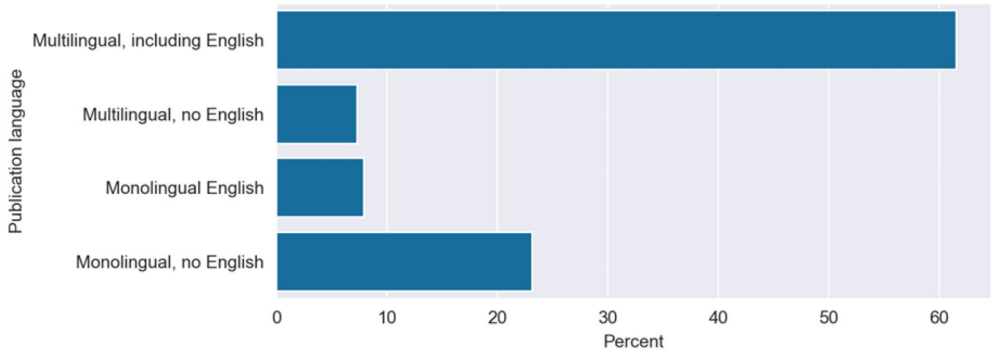

FIGURE 4 Language of the societies' publications, $n = 163$.

in one language only, typically using a national language. Except for one society, all societies that publish only in English are based in the United Kingdom.

Finally, a third of societies ($n = 65$, 35%) were engaged in research. Research activities were varied. Societies commonly collected research data, maintained a local library, applied for research funding, funded research, and offered workplaces or equipment for scholars. Other forms of research that were mentioned in the open-ended question were preparing projects and writing project proposals for research programmes (11 cases), writing publications (4 cases), awarding prizes and honours (2 cases), giving lectures (2 cases), supervising students (1 case), participating in surveys addressed to the societies (1 case), participating in steering and advisory committees (1 case), providing internships (1 case), and organizing field trips (1 case).

Stakeholders and collaboration

Regarding the types of collaboration societies have with other societies, we found that national collaboration was more frequent than international collaboration (Fig. 5). The most common forms of collaborations with other learned societies nationally and internationally were free-form or unofficial contacts ($n = 113$, 58% and $n = 78$, 40%, respectively) and joint projects and other activities ($n = 108$, 56% and $n = 56$, 29%, respectively). Societies also had joint publications nationally ($n = 37$, 19%) and internationally ($n = 18$, 9%). Regarding national collaboration, 16% ($n = 31$) of respondents shared member benefits with other national societies. Typical forms of international collaboration were membership in an international learned society ($n = 90$, 46%) and serving as a national branch of an international learned society ($n = 29$, 15%).

Societies collaborate with different types of organizations (Fig. 6). Most commonly, societies collaborate with universities and other higher education institutions ($n = 165$, 85%), research institutions ($n = 112$, 58%), and government administration/ministries ($n = 81$, 42%). Collaborations with civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, upper secondary schools, private companies, and primary schools are less frequent (5%–24% of the societies did so in the year before the survey).

Organization and funding of learned societies

Most ($n = 118$, 62%) societies had no salaried employees. Over a third ($n = 71$, 37%) of the 194 societies had salaried employees, and nearly two-thirds ($n = 113$, 58%) paid honoraria or

remuneration. Societies in Finland were more likely to provide financial rewards for work ($n = 70\%$) than in the other countries (53%).

Estimating the share of voluntary work, almost half of the societies reported that 90%–100% of work was done without salary or honoraria (Fig. 7). The mean share was 72% (median 80%, range 0%–100%). The mean share of voluntary work did not vary between societies that published, organized event or carried out research activities.

The budgets of the societies in our data vary significantly. The mean budget of society was 187,687 Euros, but the median was 20,000 Euros since the budget ranged from zero to 8,302,300 Euros. Approximately half of the societies operate with a budget of fewer than 20,000 Euros, while little more than 20% have a budget exceeding 100,000 Euros (Fig. 8).

The most common source of revenue for societies was membership fees (see Fig. 9). The mean membership fee for individual members was €40 (median: €30, range: €0–215). However, there was considerable variation in the membership fees between disciplines. Fees were highest for societies in the social sciences (mean €55) and lowest in those representing all disciplines (€26) or humanities (€30).

Other common sources of revenue were publishing subsidies (e.g., from the government), grants, and other government support (Fig. 9). Only a handful of societies saw the income from journal subscriptions and book sales as the most important. However, societies that engage in publishing activities had substantially higher budgets (mean €213,800) than those that did not (mean €38,836).

Figure 9 presents the complete list of sources of income that societies perceived as most important for them. Sources of income in the 'other' category were, for example, income from conferences and capital income. There were no notable differences in the budgets between societies that hold conferences or seminars and those that do not. However, societies that engage in research activities had substantially higher budgets (mean €388,856) than those that did not (mean €79,572).

Members and membership

The majority ($n = 120$, 63%) of the societies participating in the study had only individual members. Another 34% ($n = 65$) had both individual or organizational members. Only 1% ($n = 2$) had organizations as their sole members, and 2% ($n = 4$) had no

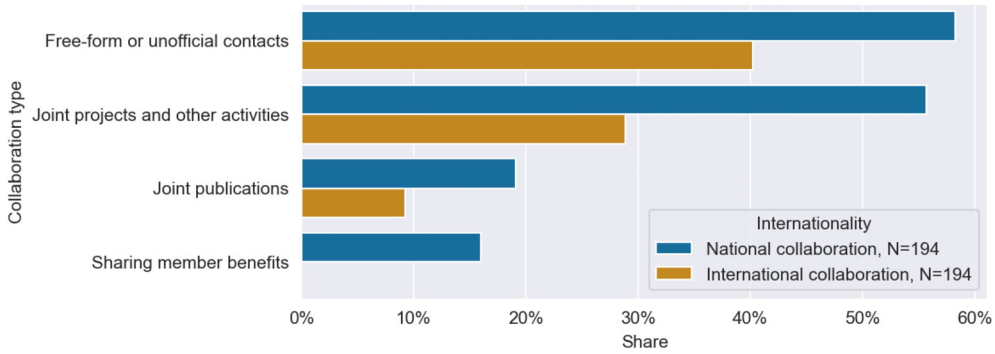

FIGURE 5 Share of different types of collaboration with national and international learned societies, $n = 194$.

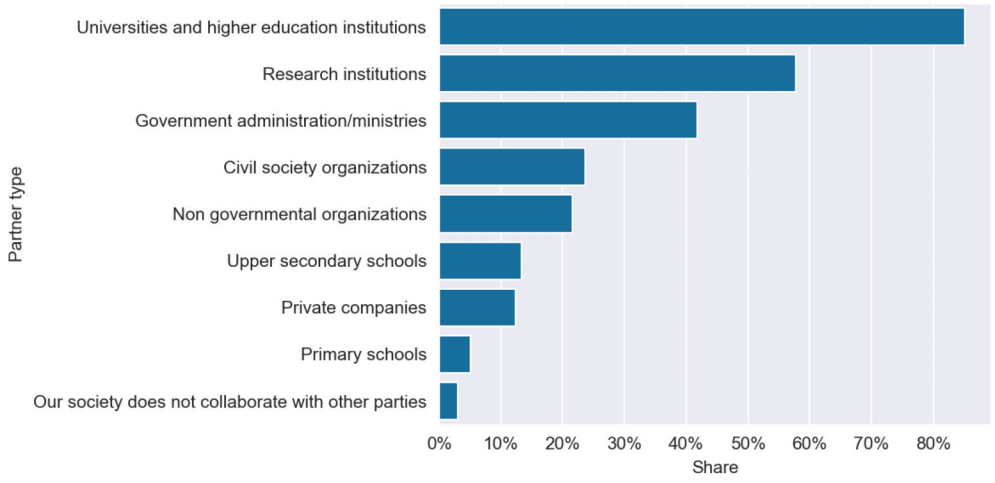

FIGURE 6 Share of different types of collaboration partners ($n = 194$).

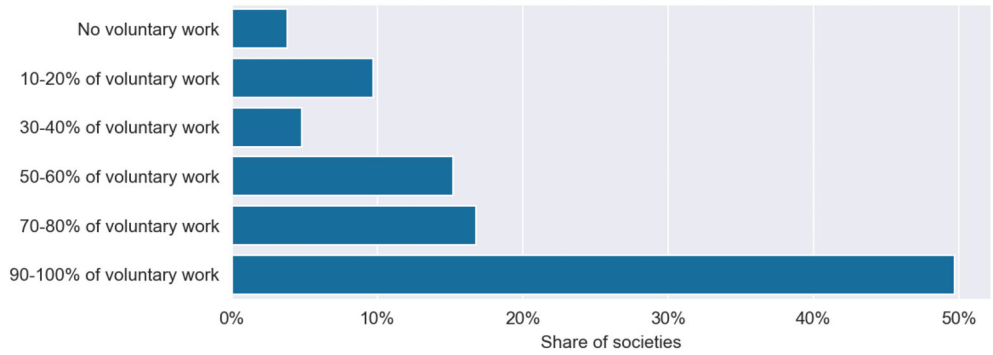

FIGURE 7 Estimation of the share of work that was carried out without salary, fee, or compensation ($n = 185$).

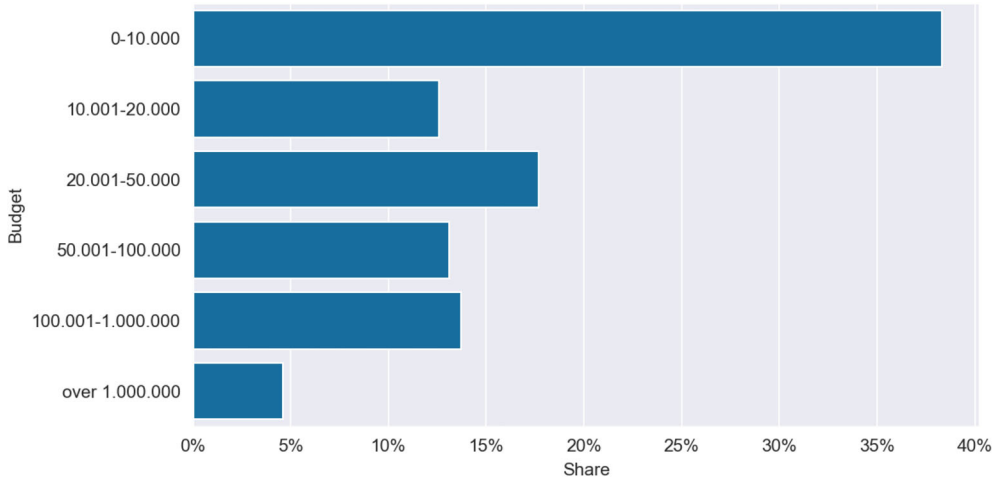

FIGURE 8 Distribution of share of budgets ($n = 175$).

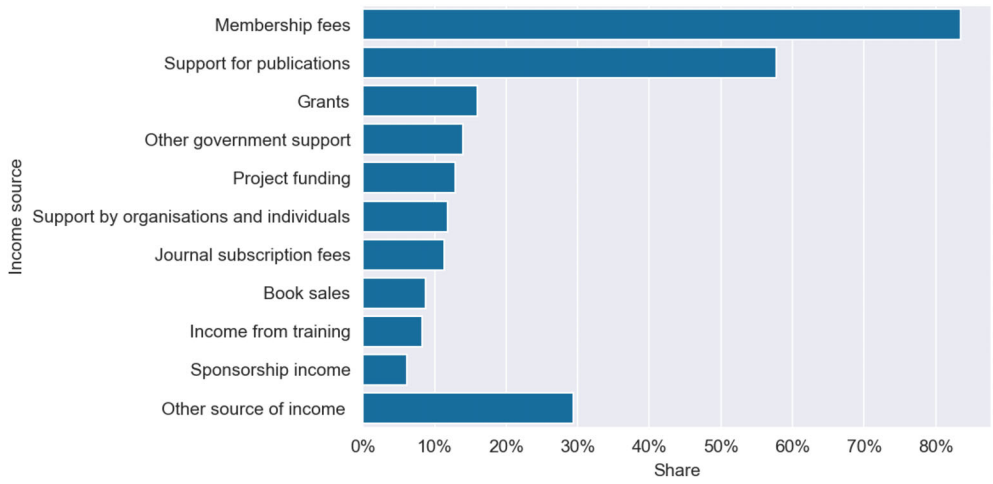

FIGURE 9 Most important sources of income ($n = 194$).

members. In the survey, respondents were asked to report the number of individual members. For Finland, the number of members was obtained from the national register. On average, the societies had 386 individual members (median 200), but the number of members ranged from zero to 3000. In total, the 189 societies reported having 72,949 members.

Since membership fees are the primary source of revenue for most societies, the number of individual members correlates with the society's budget ($n = 175$, $r = 0.492$). Therefore, a higher number of members correlates with a larger budget. Similarly, societies that engaged in research had more members (mean 545 members) than those that did not (mean 303 members). However, there were no differences between societies publishing or organizing conference/seminar activities.

Most (60%) societies were active in recruiting new members. In the open-ended question, respondents described recruiting at conferences, in publications, on websites, on social media and through word of mouth, among other methods. New members were also recruited by offering conference and publication subscription fee discounts. Open comments also stressed the importance of reaching out to students and young researchers.

Most societies provided various benefits, such as member discounts (Fig. 10). The most common member benefits relate to the society's events and scholarly communication, such as an opportunity to participate in the society's events, providing a newsletter for members, a discount from accreditation fees for events arranged by the society, and a discount from a society journals subscription fee. A fifth offer an opportunity to apply for grants and provide a discount on participation fees for events organized by the society's cooperation partners. Less commonly provided benefits included professional advocacy, employment support, workplaces, insurance, and the promotion of professional interests.

Changes to activities, membership, and finances

Prior research has found evidence of a diminishing role of learned societies and increasing worries about losing members (Delicado et al., 2014; Korkeamäki et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2005). It remains an open question, however, to what extent this also applies to SSH societies in the countries of our study. The survey, therefore, specifically probed for substantial changes that may have occurred in the preceding 5 years.

Our results suggest no overall substantial reduction in the role of learned societies in SSH in the last 5 years. The main results of these questions are summarized in Fig. 11. The overall picture is characterized by balance, as most societies reported neither a decrease nor an increase for each potential change. Regarding activities, a significant number of societies have reported an increase in both scholarly and societal publishing activities, as well as in research activities, compared to those reporting a decrease. However, it is worth noting that a slightly higher percentage of societies have experienced a decline (22%) in the organization of events compared to those indicating an increase (17%).

The societies were also asked about other changes that have taken place in publishing activities in the form of open-ended questions. Out of the 84 comments given, 33 concerned the digitalization of the publications. Societies have transformed, especially in their journal publishing on digital platforms. In some cases, the digitalization also concerned older publications. Another critical change concerned moving into open access publishing ($n = 19$).

> We have gone full Gold Access (required by the Swiss Academies) and are considering abolishing paper publications altogether, although we are afraid, we will lose members if we do so. (Switzerland, humanities)

Other changes raised in the comments concern new types of publications ($n = 10$), publishing collaboration ($n = 10$), and the language of publications ($n = 7$). When it comes to collaboration, many societies have started to publish in collaboration with other societies. On the other hand, some societies ($n = 4$) have started to collaborate with commercial publishers. Increasing publishing in English is evident from the comments.

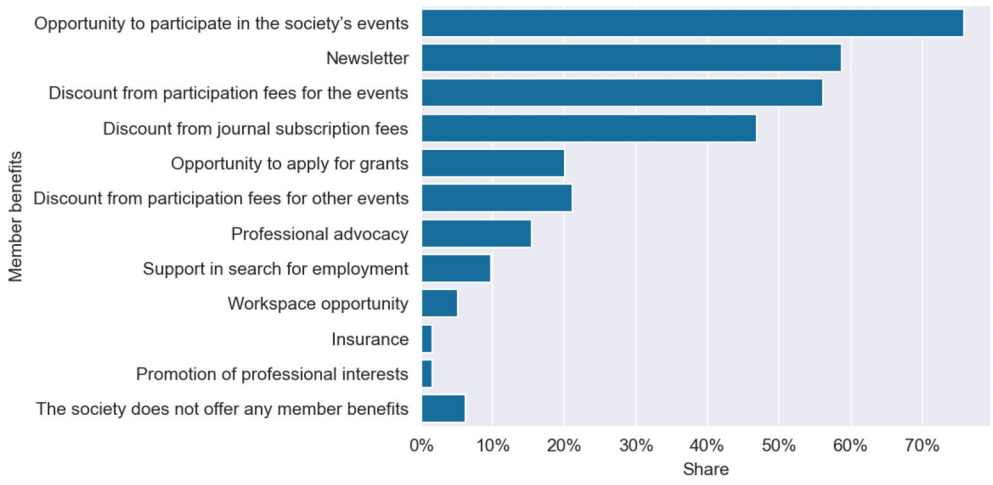

FIGURE 10 Share of member benefits provided by the societies, $n = 194$.

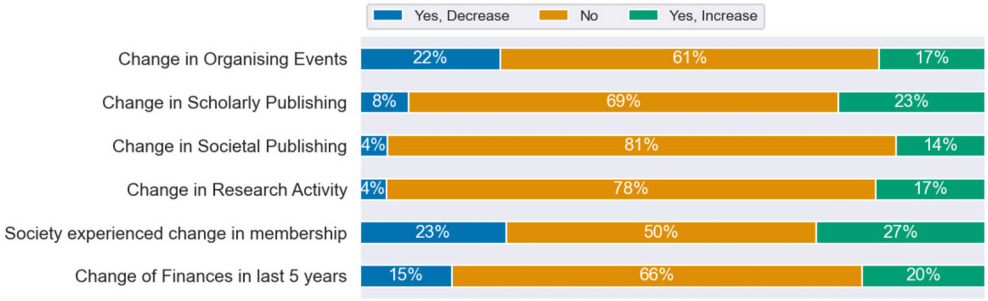

FIGURE 11 Changes to activities, membership, and finances of the societies during the last 5 years.

Only seven societies discuss the decline in publishing. The reasons provided concern the lack of indexing in international publication databases and the internationalization of research.

> Due to the requirement for international publication, it has become increasingly more difficult to attract publications because researchers favor international journals as these are the ones that are regarded as the most suitable ones. (Lithuania, social sciences)

At the organizational level, the survey investigated potential changes in membership or finances over the past 5 years. Once more, most societies indicate minimal or no change, while those reporting changes are not evenly distributed between increases and decreases, with a slight prevalence of societies reporting an increase (Fig. 11). In the open-ended comments, four societies discuss the fluctuation in their budget that often depends on the project funding received for example.

> The budget has increased, but in response to COVID-19 it will decrease for the next few years. (The UK, social sciences)

For surveying future changes, the societies were asked if they plan to launch new operations and to specify the types of new operations in the form of open-ended questions. Almost half ($n = 91$, 47%) of the societies were about to launch new forms of operating in the forthcoming years. A total of 86 societies provided their answer to the open-ended question, but several answers contained multiple new forms of operations.

Many comments related to organizing new events ($n = 40$). These included conferences or seminars intended for an academic audience but also more popular events for a broader public or students, for example. Digitalization was mentioned in many comments ($n = 10$) as many societies plan to organize more virtual events.

> More events—virtual webinars have proved popular and useful. (UK, social sciences)

New publications were brought up by 22 societies. Related with new publications journals were often mentioned but also special issues, monographs and other forms of publications such as dictionaries and learning materials. Developing open access to publications was mentioned by four societies. Reaching for broader audiences and public engagement was also discussed in comments ($n = 7$) about new publications.

> The goal has been to start maintaining some kind of blog where the association's events could be discussed. (Finland, social sciences)

Digitalization was another major issue identified from the comments ($n = 21$). As many of the comments related to the digitalization of events, other digitalization projects were also about to launch. These involved developing the society website and other online resources. Many (7) comments discussed moving to digital in general.

> Assess the potential of digital platforms as ways of disseminating the association's activities. (Portugal, SSH)

Facilitating research and networking ($n = 12$) was also planned. Many comments emphasized networking possibilities for doctoral students, but other groups, including postdocs, professionals and alumni, were also brought up.

> The society has started to coordinate doctoral student events and continues to promote the networking in the field, which is otherwise weak in Finland. (Finland, humanities)

Developing and increasing collaboration is on the agenda of some societies ($n = 8$). New collaborations were varied, including collaboration beyond academic institutions, with students, national and international collaboration, and with other societies in conference and publishing activities.

Other less often mentioned new forms of operating in the open-ended comments concerned launching new scholarly

awards ($n = 2$), starting new research projects ($n = 3$), widening the scope of the society ($n = 2$), employing new people ($n = 1$), and developing acquisition of members ($n = 2$). One society also brought up that launching new operations depends on the financial situation in which for example the pandemic may have influenced.

> Many of our projects as well as our financing are impaired by the COVID-19 crisis, so we aborted plans for all new projects. (Croatia, humanities)

DISCUSSION

This article provides valuable insights into the status and dynamics of national learned societies in SSH. In the following, we will discuss the main findings of our study in relation to earlier research. We will also discuss the limitations of the study and point out future research opportunities.

Our main finding is that the focus of learned societies is on promoting specific scholarly disciplines, which aligns with Delicado et al.'s (2014) findings, illustrating the consistent commitment of learned societies across disciplines to academic excellence in their fields. However, learned societies play a multifaceted role as they are actively involved in scholarly publishing and organizing events. The recognition of national journals, especially those in national languages, as important publication channels, resonates with a broader readership that extends beyond academia (Pölönen et al., 2021). This reinforces the societal impact of SSH learned societies and their commitment to the dissemination of knowledge, leading to another aspect related to scholarly societies: they are crucial intermediaries in the academic ecosystem.

Learned societies not only promote academic discourse, but also bridge the gap between academia and the general public. This is consistent with the observations of Hewitt et al. (2017) and Delicado et al. (2014), emphasizing the pivotal role of these societies in facilitating academic discourse and disseminating knowledge. However, the extent to which universities recognize the value of learned societies as important partners and intermediaries in bridging the gap between academia and society remains an area for further research and evaluation. The dynamics of this relationship can potentially have far-reaching implications for the role of learned societies in the ever-evolving landscape of knowledge dissemination and scholarly engagement.

In the dynamic and highly complex academic world, learned societies provide stability and nuanced academic practices. The absence of significant shifts away from peer-reviewed journals, as reported by Delicado et al. (2014) in Portugal, indicates the stability of publishing practices within SSH learned societies. This stability can be attributed to the unique role these societies play in countries where commercial publishers are less prevalent, as the example of Finland shows (Late et al., 2020). The international practice of publishing in multiple languages in SSH, highlighted by Kulczycki et al. (2020), underlines the role of learned societies in enabling multilingualism. This is in line with the recommendations to promote open science and multilingualism (Council of the European Union, 2022; UNESCO, 2021), which emphasize the societal importance of these societies.

Our examination of the internationalization of learned societies reveals a diverse landscape in terms of their operational scope. While most societies are primarily active at the national level, a significant number engage internationally. In their cooperation efforts, the societies often maintain informal contacts and carry out joint projects with national and international counterparts. The dynamic nature of these collaborations highlights the adaptability and potential for mutual cooperation within the ecosystem of learned societies (see Korkeamäki et al., 2019; Legge, 2020). For example, the Society Publishers' Coalition (SocPC, www.socpc.org/) is a notable example of collective efforts in the learned society domain. These initiatives reflect the evolving landscape of scholarly publishing and the proactive stance of societies in addressing current challenges.

One of these challenges is financial viability. Volunteers carry out an outstanding share of the work done in societies. Based on the observed budget differences, consistent with previous studies (Delicado et al., 2014; Hewitt et al., 2017; Korkeamäki et al., 2019), future research could explore the financial sustainability of learned societies. It is important to investigate the strategies employed by societies of different sizes to secure funding and manage their budgets effectively. Are there innovative financial models or income diversification strategies that smaller societies can adopt to ensure their longevity?

Concerning financial viability, one disparity arises with the newest trend towards open access (Vuong, 2020). Learned societies are avid supporters of OA, as evidenced by the fact that a significant proportion of Diamond OA journals (journals not charging fees from either authors or readers) especially in SSH are managed by non-profit organizations such as learned societies (Armengou et al., 2023). This commitment certainly has its price in terms of reduced income and potential financial problems analysed by Bosman et al. (2021), but at the same time, it ensures effective communication of learned societies with relevant research community and society. External funding, such as publishing subsidies, grants, and government support, is crucial for the financial stability of learned societies. External funding is often indicated for specific activities such as publishing and research but can help to sustain societies' other activities such as collaboration and networking. How do these funding sources affect the autonomy and direction of the societies' mission? Are there potential tensions or dependencies that societies face in pursuing financial sustainability?

The role of societies in nurturing communities, fostering connections, and providing valuable services to members was clearly expressed, and this resonates with the findings of Delicado et al. (2014) and Hewitt et al. (2017). Without the efforts of the learned societies, hundreds of scholarly events would not happen regularly. These events are a crucial part of the platform that

promotes and sustains the active participation we have observed within these academic communities. This, in turn, has emerged as a central theme of our findings and reflects members' high level of engagement. Scientists and professionals, both early career and established, actively contribute to developing responsible scholarship within their respective disciplines through their involvement in learned societies (Late et al., 2022a). In particular, scholars actively contribute to disseminating knowledge by publishing their research findings in society-affiliated journals and participating in conferences, seminars, and workshops organized by these societies (Brown, 2016; Hewitt et al., 2017). This vibrant culture of participation is not only the reason for the continued relevance of learned societies but also exemplifies their role as dynamic hubs for advancing knowledge and fostering meaningful connections among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers across institutions and organizations (Durrani, 2021; Hewitt et al., 2017).

Although prior research has found evidence of a diminishing role of learned societies (Delicado et al., 2014; Korkeamäki et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2005), the survey results do not indicate significant decrease or increase in SSH society activities. Yet, some societies brought up the internationalization of scholarly publishing and financial viability as decreasing factors for their activities. However, mostly societies reported changes concerning, for example, the digitalization of publishing and events and open access to publications. In the future, societies plan to have new operations, especially related to new types of events and publications. Our findings showed the importance of reaching out to broader audiences. The digitalization of society work is also still on the table in many cases. Other plans concern networking and collaboration that already are at the very heart of the society work (Delicado et al., 2014; Hewitt et al., 2017; Korkeamäki et al., 2019). Thus, the results indicate that societies are planning to keep their traditional tasks but further develop these to meet the needs of their members.

This article has limitations. First, the size of the survey sample is limited and heavily focused on Finnish societies. Because of the varying organization practices of societies in different countries and limited knowledge base about the societies, we could not recognize and invite all societies in SSH to take part in the survey. This was the case, for example, in the United Kingdom. Therefore, we could not evaluate the representativeness of our sample or make comparisons between countries. However, our results show that the findings of earlier studies focusing on single countries are confirmed across different countries in Europe. While not being a random sample, it is sufficient to show the diversity of activities of the surveyed societies. Indeed, societies are likely to take more variety in forms and sizes in different countries and disciplines than we see in our sample. For example, support for national journals varies across countries and affects the societies' chosen business models (Wise & Estelle, 2020). In countries like the United Kingdom, where the national language is English and commercial publishers have a strong presence, the situation is likely to be different. A comparison considering country-specific subsidy models would be an exciting avenue for future research (Laakso & Multas, 2023). However, such research questions can only be addressed if a register of learned societies will be available to draw a high-quality, representative sample from.

Second, our sample covers societies only in some of the fields of SSH. Although we did not find many differences between societies representing SSH, there are likely differences between SSH fields and those in STEM. Report by Late et al. (2022a) show that Finnish SSH societies attract less members beyond academic organizations compared with STEM societies. Furthermore, they show that members of SSH societies value more national peer reviewed journals compared with members of STEM societies. Thus, SSH societies may have more traditional academic institutional role compared with those in STEM. Indeed, the internalization of research in STEM fields mostly likely influence the activities of the national societies. Interesting question is, what is the role of the national peer reviewed journal or conference for example, in a field where publishing is focused on international arenas? Is it serving the needs of the broader audience the society reach by membership? It would, therefore, be important to explore how differences in research cultures (e.g., Whitley, 2000) across disciplines influence the work of these societies.

Third, the survey data was collected in 2019 and 2020 and most of the questions concerned society activities and changes in 2018 and 2019. Thus, it is possible that some changes in the activities have taken place since our data collection, for example due to the COVID pandemic. Our data indicates that the pandemic may have decreased funding for some societies. Also, learned societies may have had to cancel events during the pandemic and moved using digital communication channels (Late et al., 2022b). However, our results also show that digitalization is on top of the agenda of societies, which has been accelerated due to the pandemic, which was mainly happening during the time of our fieldwork. Thus, while our study does not cover all changes since the pandemic, it is comparable to previous research, which was the main aim of the study. At the same time, the results do suggest that the issues that came with the pandemic (digitalization) were already prevalent at the time of our survey.

Fourth, this article focuses only on selected activities of learned societies although it is clear that societies have varying other activities for example related with career and professional development training. Potential future research topics focusing on learned societies include their role in citizen science, the promotion of responsible science, and societal impact, for example.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides insights into a segment of the extensive landscape of national learned societies in Europe. Given that there is not much cross-national and cross-discipline research on learned societies and increasing concerns that national learned societies have come under pressure due to internationalization and other

developments in higher education, this study addressed two broad research questions: (a) do the previous findings from individual countries or small selections of societies hold for a broad range of national learned societies in SSH across Europe? and (b) are national learned societies under pressure due to internationalization and commercialization processes?

The study finds that many of previous findings indeed hold across a broad range of learned societies in SSH across Europe. Additionally, our findings expand the previous studies and show that national learned societies play an important role in promoting multilingualism in science, collaborating with a large range of stakeholders, and fostering interdisciplinarity. Internationalization does not seem to impact societies in SSH across Europe directly, as the vast majority of the surveyed societies (85%) are national, and there are no indications that these national learned societies, particularly in SSH, are losing their 'national character', as suggested in the UNESCO report (UNESCO, 2005).

Despite considerable diversity in activities and membership, SSH learned societies across eight countries form a distinct group of bottom-up researcher communities, sharing common goals, functions, and challenges. While our results indicate that the most common objective for learned societies is promoting a specific scholarly discipline, it is worth noting that a significant portion of our respondents represent more than one discipline, indicating a departure from exclusive discipline-focused goals. Regarding the first research question, we can conclude that we find even more diversity in activities, services, and roles than described in the previous literature.

Regarding the second research question, our results challenge earlier predictions of a diminishing role for national learned societies. Most SSH societies in our study did not report significant changes in the studied activities, membership, or finances over the past 5 years. Instead, they continue to play pivotal roles as conference organizers and community builders by developing their ways of operating to meet their members' needs.

In conclusion, this study addresses a significant gap in understanding the roles and functions of national learned societies in SSH across Europe by shedding light on various aspects of learned societies' activities, collaboration efforts, organizational structures, and memberships. These findings corroborate and extend the conclusions drawn from prior research regarding the multifaceted roles played by national learned societies in contemporary social sciences and humanities. Finally, the survey shows that, while some societies struggle with low budgets and rely heavily on volunteering work, there are no signs that national learned societies are about to disappear. Rather, they are well-connected and successfully fulfil important roles in higher education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors equally participated on the conceptualisation, data collection, writing and editing the article. EL, RG and MO were responsible for the data analysis.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Survey participants have given informed consent to participate in the study. No personal data was collected or analysed in the study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study are openly available in Finnish Social Science Data Archive at http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD3596, reference number [FSD3596] and at https://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD3595, reference number [FSD3595].

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