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Part IV
Evaluation of Research in the Humanities
in Practice

Peer Review in the Social Sciences and Humanities at the European Level: The Experiences of the European Research Council

Thomas König

Abstract In this article, I outline the evaluation process established by the European Research Council (ERC) and present results of the ERC's funding calls between 2007 and 2012. Because of its European added value, the ERC is a unique funding organization in the European research landscape. Based on a rigorous evaluation process, the ERC dedicates a considerable share of its budget to the social sciences and humanities.

1 The European Research Council's Mission

The European Research Council (ERC) was established in 2007 as part of the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme (namely, the 'Ideas' Specific Programme); under the new framework program, Horizon 2020, it has been extended until 2020. Since inception, the ERC has filled a gap in the European funding landscape. The council's principle is to make decisions on the criterion of 'excellence only'. Although RD&I funding has become a major policy issue of European integration during the last 20 years, cutting-edge basic research remained largely underdeveloped at the European level (Dosi et al. 2009, pp. 233, 234). There are several reasons for this delay. One is the initial mandate to the European Commission to fund research under framework programs to the extent it supports the competitiveness of European industry. Consensus on the need to fund frontier research at the European level was not reached until the negotiations for FP7.

In the initial reasoning for setting up the ERC, frontier research was perceived as the (necessary) counterpart to a top-down approach in research funding, because frontier research is an investment in the European knowledge base and the innovation cycle (Schibany and Gassler 2010). Equally important, however, the ERC makes genuine competition among research institutions and researchers at the European level possible for the first time. The previous framework programs (FPs) lacked a specific

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drive to integration (Banchoff 2002). It turns out that, with the bottom-up approach and simple funding instruments, the ERC contributes significantly to a 'European added value' (Andr e 2009; Stampfer 2008). Under the FP7 framework, the ERC received 15 % of the entire budget dedicated to research funding, totaling EUR 7.5 billion over 7 years, which makes the ERC a powerful instrument for funding research at the frontier of knowledge. Together with well-established national research funding organizations in European countries (although endowed with unequal budgets), the ERC now contributes decisively to fostering the European Research Area, the backbone of the European knowledge society. Under Horizon 2020, the ERC's budget will increase considerably, to approximately EUR 13.1 billion.

1.1 How Does the ERC Work?

The governing body of the ERC is the Scientific Council, which is responsible for developing the ERC's strategy. The Scientific Council represents the ERC to the scientific community, establishes the annual Work Program and in general ensures the ERC's high profile. The Scientific Council is composed of 22 highly distinguished members of the European scientific community, acting in a personal capacity. The governing structure of the ERC will change under the new legislation of Horizon 2020 (Nowotny 2013); however, the main principle will remain the same: Committed only to the principle of scientific excellence, the Scientific Council members are independent from political, economic, or other interests. To administratively support the Scientific Council, the Executive Agency (ERCEA) was created in 2009. Located in Brussels, the ERCEA currently has a staff of approximately 380, and the number is rising.

Exclusively committed to funding curiosity-driven, bottom-up frontier research by individual principal investigators (PIs) in EU member states or associated countries host institutions, the ERC is open to applications from all fields and to researchers from all over the world. At the moment, three funding mechanisms have been established. For talented post-docs and early-stage researchers (between 2 and 7 years after PhD), the Starting Grant scheme offers funding for 5 years and a project budget of up to EUR 1.5 million. The Consolidator Grant scheme, implemented since 2013, is a breakout from the Starting Grant call; this scheme covers the subsequent scientific career steps for more advanced scientists (seven to 12 years past PhD). Finally, well-established, senior researchers can apply under the Advanced Grant scheme, which offers funding for 5 years and a project budget of up to EUR 2.5 million. Advanced Grant applicants must have a distinguished track record over the past 10 years and present an innovative, ambitious research project. In 2012, the Scientific Council implemented a fourth grant programme for research groups, called the Synergy Grant. In addition, the Proof of Concept Scheme provides an opportunity for current ERC grantees to receive top-up funding for commercializing their research results. Each grant call is usually published annually.

Projects are funded based on proposals presented by individual researchers on subjects of their choice, with a clear emphasis on interdisciplinary and high-risk projects. Proposals are evaluated on the sole criterion of scientific excellence. Since there are no thematic or other priorities preselecting among the ideas and projects that applicants wish to pursue, evaluation of the project proposals relies heavily on the expertise of the reviewers. The ERC evaluation process is carried out by 25 panels for each funding mechanism with alternate panels put in place every other year—adding up to 75 panels annually (not including the extra panels in the Synergy Grant, which follows a different evaluation procedure). Each panel consists of approximately 12 to 16 panel members, all international experts in their field. They are supported by approximately 1,600 external (remote) reviewers per call.

1.2 European Added Value

Within a very short period, the ERC has become an undisputed success story. With its simple funding instruments, the ERC responds to the expectations of the younger generation of researchers who seek to break out of academic hierarchies and their national systems to obtain early scientific independence. And the ERC encourages advanced researchers to pursue riskier ideas that might lead to new breakthroughs and discoveries. However, beyond providing trustworthy and fair funding opportunities for the European scientific community exclusively based on scientific merit, the ERC carries European ‘added value’ (Nedeva and Stampfer 2012).

This ‘added value’ can be demonstrated on two levels. The first is related to the evaluation process. The ERC’s evaluation process has won such high acclaim and reputation that high-level experts are willing to participate in the lengthy evaluation process, knowing that the ERC upholds its promise of the highest professionalism and, at the same time, allows them to witness the newest developments in their field. One of the most significant results of the ERC is the completely international set-up of its evaluation panels. On average, no more than two experts from the same country are represented on one panel, and on average, seven to ten countries are represented on one panel. Thus, the ERC has the most international evaluation procedure in place. At the same time, the panels are an excellent breeding ground for establishing a truly European academic culture that profits from the diverse cultural background of members, but is nevertheless focused on intrinsically scientific values.

The second level is related to the stimulation ERC grants provide to research institutions in Europe. It is based on a quite simple but nevertheless very effective equation: Countries and host institutions (universities and other research centres) can compare how many ERC grants they have won. With ERC grants distributed all over Europe, we start to see certain patterns. In terms of absolute numbers, related to the size of the population, the biggest winners of ERC grants thus far have been the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Israel. Comparisons like this that make policy makers and scientists demand more efficient infrastructure and support, in order to

achieve better results in the ERC grant competition. By and large, the ERC has become a quality threshold for the European research community.

The success story of the ERC has been critically acclaimed in evaluations (Vike-Freiberga et al. 2009; Annerberg et al. 2010, pp. 34–37) and public statements. As a role model for institution building, the ERC has already raised the interest of independent researchers (Gross et al. 2010; Hummer 2007; Nedeva 2009) and students (Haller 2010; Tan 2010). Members of the Scientific Council, when presenting the ERC to the academic community, continuously stress that the ERC is a learning institution and that improvements, particularly regarding the governance structure and the long-term funding of the ERC, are still needed (Antonoyiannakis and Kafatos 2009; Fricker 2009; Gilbert 2010; Nowotny 2010, 2013; Winnacker 2008).

2 Why Social Sciences and Humanities?

It goes without saying that the panels and reviewers follow the highest standards of peer review, as established and monitored by the ERC. The 25 panels are divided into three domains: physics and engineering (PE), life sciences (LS) and social sciences and humanities (SH). According to an interview with Helga Nowotny, ERC president from 2010 to 2013, the ERC was initially planned to cover only life sciences and physics, and it took some effort to convince politicians and representatives of the ‘hard sciences’ that social sciences and humanities must be included. Now the ERC’s agenda is clear, as Nowotny, a sociologist by training, emphasizes: ‘We fund research in the 19th century, German conception of *Wissenschaft*, which includes everything’ (Enserink 2011, p. 1135).

Under FP7, the share of social sciences and humanities in the ERC’s overall budget of EUR 7.51 billion was approximately 17%. This was a much higher share than any other programme dedicated to social sciences and humanities. For example, in the ‘capacities’ special program, the socio-economic sciences and the humanities accounted for only 2%. What is interesting, however, is that the social sciences and humanities were slower in recognizing the ERC as a source of funding. After a weak start in the first calls in 2007 and 2008, the number of applications rose more sharply in the SH domain than in the other domains. And, as we shall see, in the SH domain the popularity of the ERC still differs remarkably between disciplines and fields.

2.1 An Inclusive Approach

We live in a time when ‘innovation’ has almost gained the status of a buzzword in the European political discourse. Public spending for research is often evaluated along the (promised) impact on economic development. However, there is more to innovation. Whether it is a result of the financial crisis that asks for a critical validation of our understanding of capitalism, or the general question how to support societies

abroad, struggling to find a just and democratic society: Every time questions on societal and cultural foundations arise, in-depth analysis and expertise are required from the social sciences and humanities.

Unfortunately, the very disciplines and fields usually subsumed under the label of social sciences and humanities, thus far, cannot take advantage of this. An analysis of previous efforts by the European Commission showed that, although these programs were received very well by the community, the influence on ‘the strategies and practices [...] has been limited’ (Watson et al. 2010, p. 17). Whether the ERC’s inclusive approach will have a more stimulating effect on elevating social sciences and humanities on the European level in the future remains to be seen. But it deserves our close attention here to clarify what lies behind the inclusive meaning of *Wissenschaft*. Clearly, in the sense of spanning all scientific fields, it avoids the danger of limiting the success of new approaches and the possibility of projects not being fundable because of a lack of expertise. Since the ERC actively encourages scientists to reach beyond disciplinary borders and to implement interdisciplinarity as a fundamental principle in European research, the number of cross-panel and cross-domain projects is increasing.

The ERC funds not merely basic research but also *frontier research*. This distinction is crucial for the role of the social sciences and humanities in the ERC, and therefore needs more explanation. According to a now famous classification, research can be divided along two different motivating factors: the role of applications and the use and the depth of understanding of causes, phenomena and behaviour. From the four possible combinations, frontier research can be understood as that ‘of applications-oriented research with the pursuit of fundamental understanding’ (Whitley 2000, p. xxi). This kind of research is often also represented by the reference to Louis Pasteur (Stokes 1997), but it drives not only parts of the ‘hard sciences’ as genetics, for example. Indeed, as has been noted, this motivating combination can be ‘found in most of the human sciences’ (Whitley 2000, p. xxi), because these fields of knowledge are concerned with societal and human affairs. Thus, the social sciences and humanities are particularly well suited for the type of research that the ERC aims to fund.

Social sciences and humanities have always played a distinctive role in the European Commission’s research programs (Kastrinos 2010, pp. 300–304). Nevertheless, due to the austerity principles established in the aftermath of the financial crisis, concerns have been growing over the past few years that the social sciences and humanities programs will be severely cut in the European Commission’s next multi-annual funding program, Horizon 2020. On December 8, 2010, social scientists published a memorandum warning of ‘alarming developments’ (Risse et al. 2010). Since then, the debate on the role of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020 has taken many turns, and dominated the EU Presidency Conference in Vilnius in September 2013 (Mayer et al. 2014).

That there is a widespread feeling of threats to funding for social sciences and humanities within the communities is not so much because politicians disregard these fields, as the common belief goes. Instead, it is a consequence of the fact that the social sciences and humanities have only weak institutional forms of advocating on

the European level. For example, there is no equivalent to the well-organized and powerful European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) that participates in many important events and represents the interests of its field in many respects.

For the social sciences and humanities, this lack of representation has its reasons. Most research funding in these fields still comes from national sources, and it is on this level for which knowledge is produced and on which representation is focused. In an integrated Europe with new funding opportunities, however, orientation along national aspects becomes detrimental. To compensate the lack of institutional representation, members of disciplines and fields in the social sciences and humanities therefore often resort to an alarmist rhetoric. Since the ERC will continue to follow its inclusive approach, the council is becoming an important point of reference for the social sciences and humanities.

2.2 *ERC Evaluation in the Social Sciences and Humanities*

Based on an excellence-only approach, the ERC evaluation follows a well-established, rigid process. Two aspects are particularly important:

- (A) The process is the same over all three domains. There is no special treatment for any discipline or research field regarding the evaluation process, simply because of two reasons. Cross-panel proposals are distributed to members of other panels; in order to incorporate these evaluations, the procedure must be consistent. Additionally, the Scientific Council believes that proposals from all fields can be assessed under the same premise, namely, excellence. Of course, there are huge differences in what excellence means in different disciplines, fields and paradigms. However, there can be no doubt that excellence exists in each case, and that the focus on excellence as the only criterion for selection helps to foster the intrinsic values of *Wissenschaft* across all domains.
- (B) The ERC focuses on individual, bottom-up research projects with one PI. Since the proposal and the PI's track record are crucial for the success of the funded project, they are thoroughly assessed by multidisciplinary panels. This approach distinguishes between the originality of the proposal and the PI's capability to actually carry out the proposal.

What makes the ERC so special in Europe is not that the council funds research based on this notion of excellence, nor that the ERC relies on a rigid peer review system. This is nothing new, since the most prominent funding organization, the U.S. National Science Foundation, was founded in 1950. Other organizations in industrialized countries either followed this model or set up variants. All over Europe, funding organizations rely on decision-making procedures similar to those described by the European Science Foundation (2011). In many respects, therefore, the ERC is simply absorbing well-established procedures and patterns, particularly in the evaluation process. Nevertheless, within this reliable structure, the ERC has also developed remarkable new features. The most important aspect is the fruitful combination of

the internationality of the ERC peer review process with the rigid process put in place. This combination creates a diversified approach to excellence.

The proposal evaluation follows a two-step procedure. In the first step, after proposals have been submitted and eligibility has been checked, panel members evaluate the proposals and the track record of the grant applicants. These are the only two criteria for the evaluation process. An original project proposal and an excellent career path are required to reach the second step of the evaluation. In preparation for the second step, the applicant's proposal and CV are again evaluated, this time not only by at least three panel members assigned to the proposal but also by remote (external) reviewers, specifically from the research field of the proposal. This is also a very important undertaking with cross-panel and cross-domain proposals. In the case of such proposals, a streaming takes place, using appropriate experts from other panels. Thus, the ideal mix of expertise can be achieved, also with an interdisciplinary proposal.

The second step of the evaluation process is different in the Starting and Consolidator Grant schemes and the Advanced Grant scheme. In the latter, where it is assumed that the PI has already gained a recognizable position in his/her field, the final funding decision is based on a second, thorough assessment of the proposals that made it into step two. In the Starting and Consolidator Grant schemes, where young researchers competing for large sums, the panels are required to get a better impression of the PI. Thus, every Starting and Consolidator Grant applicant who made it to step two is invited to an interview with the panel. The interview serves two purposes: It shows whether the PI is really committed to his/her research proposal and if he/she is really capable of doing it. At the same time, the interview gives the PI the opportunity to engage in a discussion with the panel in order to convince its members of the PI's intellectual strength and his/her commitment to the proposed research.

Peer review is a well-established procedure. When assessing the intrinsic scientific value of a research project proposal, peer reviewing is the only valid selection procedure. Nevertheless, peer review has its flaws, particularly in terms of the novelty of approaches, concepts and methodologies. If panels decide according to conventional wisdom and are not prepared to choose risky but promising research projects, the panels fail to achieve the ERC's main target. In the case of social sciences and humanities, a particularly broad range of different conceptual approaches exists. Lamont (2009, p. 57) distinguishes different types of epistemological styles (constructivist, comprehensive, positivist, utilitarian), and all panels must respect each style as scholarly valuable.

There are several ways on which the ERC relies in order to achieve a fair evaluation procedure focused on excellence, and all are centered on the evaluation panels. To begin, the ERC Scientific Council sets up the panels in a broad, interdisciplinary way. Only 25 panels cover all fields of science, scholarship and engineering. Let's take a closer look at the six panels that are assembled under the two letters SH. Fields and disciplines range from economics and management (SH1), sociology, anthropology, political science, law (SH2), geography, demography, migration, environmental and

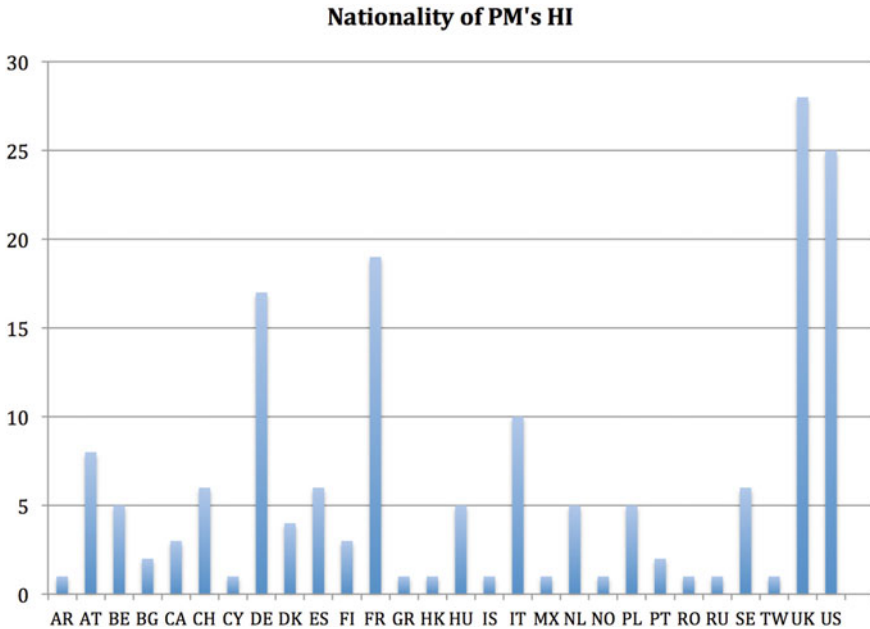


Fig. 1 Nationality of panel members' host institution

urban studies (SH3), linguistics, philosophy, education, psychology (SH4), literature and philology, art history, musicology (SH5) to history and archaeology (SH6).

Panel members are selected based on their scientific reputation; usually they have specialist as well as generalist competence, since they have to be open to multidisciplinary research perspectives. Diversity is not, as some may expect, a contradiction to excellence. In the case of the ERC, a diversified panel is considered a strength in the evaluation process. To take but one example, the approximately 170 panel members for the 12 SH evaluation panels in 2011 were situated at host institutions in 28 different countries worldwide (see Fig. 1). Experts from Anglo-American countries (the United Kingdom and the US) made up about 30% of the total, thus presenting the largest group. Other large academic communities, such as the Germanic and the Francophone, constituted about 15% and 11%, respectively, of the total.¹

The ERC Scientific Council, responsible for selecting and nominating panel members, has committed to a gender equality plan (ERC 2011), aiming at representation of female panelists of about 40%. In the 2011 SH panels, this target was almost met; approximately 37% of the experts on the six panels were female. Finally, panel members are advised to look for unconventional career paths and take them into consideration during decision-making. If we take the rising reputation of ERC grants and the huge acceptance that the ERC receives from the European academic community, this mix of strategies seems to be successful.

¹The panel composition may change slightly during the course of an evaluation circle.

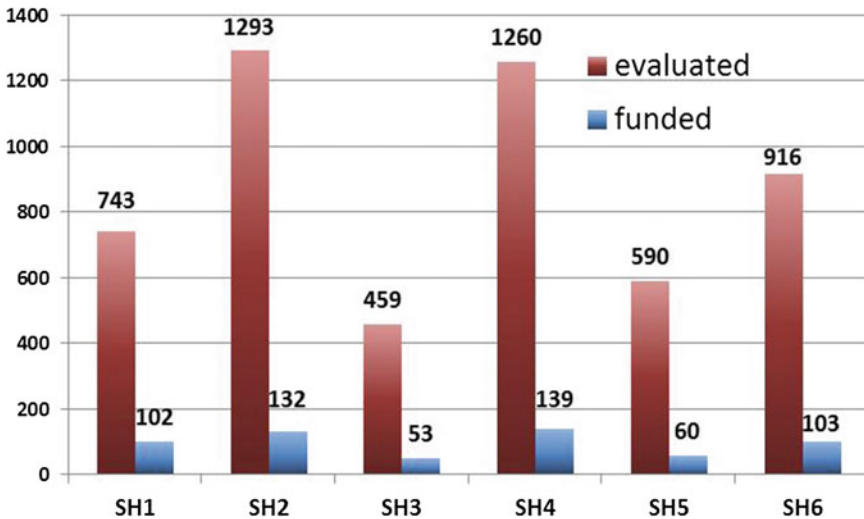


Fig. 2 Applications and granted projects submitted per panel, 2008–2012

3 What Are the Results?

Although the goal of this volume is the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), distinguishing between social sciences and humanities does not make sense in the case of the ERC. Actually, there is only one domain (SH) in which the approaches are combined and intertwined.

If we look at the accumulated results from all 10 ERC calls for individual PIs from 2007 to 2012, there are interesting patterns in the SH-related project proposals.²

The success rate of the proposals submitted to the SH panels in the ERC is on average the same as in the two other domains. SH-related project proposals constitute about 17% of the ERC budget spent on proposals submitted in these calls—or 600 projects in total.³ The number of applications is rising more sharply in the SH domain.⁴ Maybe even more significant, the number of applications to the panels is quite uneven. Thus, we can assume that certain fields (such as the social sciences in SH2 and the cognitive sciences in SH4) are more responsive to the ERC than others (such as the core humanities panel, SH5) (see Fig. 2, also the next paragraph).

²Data from the ERC Executive Agency website, <http://erc.europa.eu>. In 2007, only the Starting Grant call was announced; in 2008, only the Advanced Grant call. From 2009 onwards, both funding streams were carried out annually. When this contribution was being completed, data on these calls carried the most accurate information. The overall trend described in the following paragraphs did not change with the results of the three calls in 2013.

³This does not necessarily include so-called cross-disciplinary proposals, which were regarded as a separate ‘fourth domain’ in the earliest ERC calls.

⁴The initial ERC funding call, the Starting Grant Call of 2007, is not included here for two reasons: With a success rate of only 2%, it was heavily over-subscribed, and the panel structure was different.

Since the budget of one call for each domain is distributed to the panels along the number of applications that each panel initially received, this difference also determines the number of fundable projects per panel. Thus, this results in a striking variation in how many projects are funded by each panel. Since the panels SH3 and SH5 receive few submissions, only 53 and 60 projects, respectively, were funded during the nine calls. On the other side, SH2 and SH4 are large panels in terms of submissions, and funded 132 and 139 projects, respectively. The SH1 and SH6 panels received fewer applications, but since the project budgets for these panels were on average smaller, approximately the same number of projects was funded as in the largest panels.

If we examine the country distribution of the submitted and granted SH proposals in all 10 calls, we see that the submitted proposals and granted projects are evenly distributed throughout Europe. The largest number of applications came from the UK (1,343), followed by Italy (878), Netherlands (590), Germany (577), Spain (474) and France (422). If we look at the grants funded, British host institutions lead the field with 208, followed by Dutch (79) and French institutions (68), German (57), Italian (52) and Spanish (37).⁵

4 Outlook

We know that the way research funding is set up affects the way research is carried out in the social sciences and humanities (Marton 2005, p. 184). Not even 10 years after the ERC's inception, the question if the ERC has already shaped the way research in the social sciences and humanities is carried out remains unanswered. We can assume, however, that the ERC has had an impact on two levels (Nowotny 2009, p. 3). First, particularly young grantees achieve early independence that, thus far, is widely unknown in the European university and research systems. Since the dependency of young researchers always had a particularly crippling impact on the social sciences and humanities, we may expect new, unconventional and highly innovative knowledge from Starting and Consolidator Grantees within the next few years.

Second, these young researchers may develop a new form of non-hierarchical collaboration from which the entire range of disciplines may profit. As a result, we can assume that there is a new visibility on social sciences and humanities, since more than ever they are working on transnational, comparative topics.

Given the ERC's budget in relation to the sums spent in other programs, the ERC is still a small player. Its reputation stems from its rigid evaluation process, its strict focus on excellence and its broad, pan-European approach. For the social sciences and humanities, the ERC offers a great opportunity to strengthen frontier research in an almost unprecedented manner. Nevertheless, some issues remain critical. One

⁵Because an ERC-funded project is portable and can be shifted to a host institution in another country, we cannot calculate a success rate per country of host institutions with the data available.

of the general problems the ERC has to deal with is the gender quota, particularly in the Advanced Grant scheme. The ERC Scientific Council therefore adopted the Gender Equality Plan (ERC 2011), and commissioned a study dedicated to gender and excellence in relation to ERC-funded projects.

Even more troubling to some is the participation of certain countries, and the looming fear that these countries may not be integrated in the emerging European Research Area. Certainly, there is a need to foster independent research in these countries. The ERC cannot deviate from its core mission, namely, focus on excellence; the ERC must support research facilities and infrastructure in these countries to create an environment such that researchers at these sites become competitive.

In SH in particular, another concern is the balance of panel member composition. In some respect, the SH panels represent the strong. There are more experts from different countries, but the difficulty here is the language. In the humanities, excellent researchers sometimes do not publish in English, and therefore remain ‘invisible’ as potential reviewers. Although the diversity of experts regarding country distribution is actually quite good, more experts should be invited from countries with such well-established traditions in the humanities.

In some fields, the ERC has witnessed a steady growth of applications, while in others, the number of applications is stagnant. This often goes hand in hand with the misunderstanding that projects primarily concerned with classificatory research are submitted. Undoubtedly, this is an important field of research; however, it is not within the ERC’s funding policy, and therefore, projects with this background will be turned down. It seems that, particularly in the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), communication of what the ERC can do for these disciplines and fields must be strengthened.

To a large extent, the ERC’s high reputation among scholars and scientists comes from the fact that the evaluation process is admired and trusted by the research community. In this regard, again, diversity is crucial, because understanding excellence in a multi-dimensional way is a necessary prerequisite for research proposals from different fields and academic cultures. This understanding is already growing among the evaluation panels; one of the most fascinating aspects of the ERC is that it has created, perhaps for the first time in history, a truly transnational, that is, European, evaluation culture. In this setting, ‘excellence’ is understood not as exclusive but open to the unexpected.

The ERC involves reviewers from the entire world. Between 2007 and 2013, more than 4,000 distinguished scientists have reviewed more than 40,000 ERC applications. The panels and remote reviewers constitute the most precious asset of the ERC. The ERC has also contributed to raising the evaluation standards among national funding organizations throughout Europe and facilitates best practice by demonstrating a model of an exclusively merit-based evaluation culture, in particular for countries that, for historical reasons, lack such a culture.

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The Four ‘I’s: Quality Indicators for the Humanities

Wilhelm Krull and Antje Tepperwien

Abstract In a period, in which many things seem uncertain and yet everything is calculated and measured, the humanities can hardly avoid the evaluative quality measurement. However, a look into the world of benchmarks, ratings and rankings reveals that the oftentimes culture-specific performances of humanities research and teaching are almost immaterial therein. From the perspective of a private research funder, among others the following questions are traced: To what extent do international standards of quality exist in the humanities? Which criteria are suitable? Do assessment methods exist that allow for an adequate evaluation of performances in the humanities? To what extent should the humanities get involved with the construction of a publication and citation industry? What chance of survival do the humanities have in a world predominantly characterized by science and engineering?

1 Ranking Fever in Germany

A new era in German and European academic activities was launched on June 23, 2003, when the first Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) was published by the Center for World-Class Universities (CWCU) at the Graduate School of Education (formerly the Institute of Higher Education) of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. It has been updated on an annual basis ever since.¹ The methods and criteria upon which the ranking is based are disputed, as the chosen indicators yield a strong bias favouring universities in English-speaking countries that focus

¹On the Shanghai Ranking, see ‘Academic Ranking of World Universities’ at <http://www.arwu.org>.

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on science and engineering.² Nevertheless, since the first ‘Shanghai ranking’ was published, Germany, like most other European countries, has been caught up in a ranking fever. This is evident not only in the nearly hysterical reaction to each new update of the ranking but also in the growing number of more or less ‘homemade’ national ranking lists that have appeared in recent years in diverse newspapers and periodicals.³

A quick look at these ranking lists shows how great the current demand for quantifiable assessment of the quality of teaching and research at German universities apparently is: The news magazine *Focus*, for instance, publishes an annual ranking of German universities that seeks to find out where in Germany the best research and higher education can be found based on surveys among professors, citation analyses and data from the German Federal Statistical Office. The news magazine *Der Spiegel* turned the tables, so to speak, and produced a ranking together with AOL and McKinsey that uses an online survey to assess the excellence of a university not based on the performance of its professors but on the achievement level of its student body (grades on school-leaving examination and university intermediate examinations). The business newspaper *Handelsblatt*, for the interests of its target group, reports on the top researchers and top faculties in the field of economics. The *Hochschulanzeiger* [higher education gazette] in the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* compares the career success of graduates of private business schools in German-speaking countries. The newspaper *Karriere* chooses the best universities in the fields of economics, law, media sciences, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, industrial engineering and computer science based on a survey of graduates, personnel managers and data from the German Federal Statistical Office. The *Wirtschaftswoche* business magazine publishes the results of a survey of 200 researchers on ‘where Germany’s best researchers in the 12 most important future technologies work’ and also surveys personnel managers on the quality of graduates in economics, law, engineering sciences and computer science.

The Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) in Germany would like its ranking to stand out among the others: First published in 1998, the CHE University Ranking covers study programs and is multidimensional.⁴ However, this ranking,

²The following six indicators are decisive for a positioning in the Shanghai ranking: the number of alumni winning Nobel Prizes in physics, chemistry, medicine, or economics and Fields Medals in mathematics (10 %); the number of staff winning a Nobel Prize or Fields Medal (20 %); the number of articles written and co-authored by staff and published in the journals *Nature* and *Science* (20 %); the number of published articles written by staff and indexed in Science Citation Index - Expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index (20 %); the number of highly cited researchers at the university in 21 different fields (20 %); and per capita academic performance with respect to the size of the university (10 %). On the Shanghai ranking criteria and criticism of the criteria, see, for example, <http://www.che-ranking.de/cms/?getObject=108&getLang=d>. Accessed 2 May 2014.

³An overview of the rankings is provided at the website of the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) at <http://www.che-ranking.de/cms/?getObject=47&getLang=de>. Accessed 2 May 2014.

⁴On the CHE University Ranking, see <http://www.che-ranking.de>.

too, does not find favour with all universities and with all disciplines. For instance, the *Verband der Historikerinnen und Historiker Deutschlands* [Association of Historians in Germany] published a statement in 2009 refusing participation in ratings or rankings such as those conducted by the CHE (Historikerverband 2009).

2 The Reaction of the Humanities to the Ranking Fever

The historians' association's disapproval of rankings and ratings is an example of the difficulties that arise from the increasing demand for quantifiable evaluation of research in the humanities and social sciences. The historians' association not only rejects the larger and smaller forerunners, offshoots and competitors of the Shanghai ranking but also does not support the efforts of the *Wissenschaftsrat* (German Council of Science and Humanities) to put forward a differentiated research rating as an alternative to the overly simple and often methodologically unsound rankings by private providers: After lengthy discussions, the historians' association refused in 2009 to participate in a research rating conducted by the *Wissenschaftsrat*, which had previously conducted ratings in sociology and chemistry (Historikerverband 2009).

The historians' association acknowledged the intention of the *Wissenschaftsrat* to rate different fields in a differentiated manner and according to a catalogue of criteria negotiated upon by representatives of the fields themselves, in contrast to the procedures by other rankings. But fundamental doubts as to whether it makes sense to create such a rating and to submit to the demand for quantifiable data led to disapproval by the association. In a statement on April 4, 2009, the then president of the association, Werner Plumpe, said that the opponents of a research rating in the historical disciplines doubt the sense and meaning of such a rating. Plumpe (2009, p. 123) summed up the position of the rating opponents as follows:

Hier könne es allein aufgrund der Unmöglichkeit, ein dynamisches Fach wie die Geschichtswissenschaft parametrisch gleichsam in einer Momentaufnahme abzubilden und wertend zu erfassen, zu keinen sinnhaften Resultaten kommen. Was dabei herauskomme, seien teilweise quantifizierte, immer aber parametrisierte Informationen für politische Diskussions- und Entscheidungsprozesse, die gemessen an der Realität des Faches unterkomplex seien, der Politik aber das Gefühl des Informiertseins durch die Wissenschaft selbst vermittelten. Auf diese Weise bediene der *Wissenschaftsrat* letztlich die politische Illusion, Wissenschaft lasse sich parametrisch durch das Setzen bestimmter Anreize steuern, und fördere damit die Herausbildung und Verfestigung strategischer Verhaltensweisen, die zumindest in den Geisteswissenschaften die akademische Kultur zerstörten. Das Fach habe es aber weder nötig noch sei es im eigenen Interesse verpflichtet, die gefährlichen Illusionen der derzeit politisch hegemonialen Strömungen zu bedienen.

[Here there can be no sensible results, due already to the impossibility of portraying a dynamic discipline like history parametrically in a snapshot, so to speak, and capturing it in a rating. The result would be partly quantified but always parameterized information for policy discussions and decision processes; the information would be under-complex compared to the reality, but it would give the politicians the feeling of being informed by science itself. In that way, the *Wissenschaftsrat* would ultimately serve the political illusion

that science and scholarship can be steered parametrically by setting certain incentives, and this would thus promote the development and hardening of strategic behaviours that at least in the humanities would destroy the academic culture. But the discipline does not find it necessary, nor does it feel obligated in its own interest to serve the dangerous illusions of the current politically hegemonic trends.] (Plumpe 2009, p. 123)

In addition to these fundamental concerns, Plumpe (2009) reported that in the opinion of the rating opponents, it was also questionable how a rating could produce meaningful results unless it were continuously repeated—and would thus cost so much time and work that expenditure would be disproportionate to yield and would devour so much capacity (in the reporting and evaluation process) that it would run counter to the intention to improve the quality of research and teaching.

When the historians' association finally decided in the summer of 2009 not to participate in the rating—to boycott it essentially—their press release stated that it supported the concern of the *Wissenschaftsrat* to actively participate with the professional associations in reaching agreements on standards in the disciplines and in jointly developing discipline-specific criteria for research quality, but that it had fundamental reservations against the usefulness and feasibility of the rating being planned. In its statement, the association emphasized clearly that German historians were conscious of their responsibility to be accountable to the public and also signaled its willingness to participate in an appropriate form in the search for suitable concepts and in an open-ended discussion on the possibility of developing and measuring quality standards in the humanities (Historikerverband 2009).

This much is certain: In a time when so many things seem uncertain and yet everything is calculated and measured, the humanities can hardly avoid evaluative measurement of quality. A look at the world of benchmarks, ratings and rankings shows, though, that the often culture-specific achievements of humanities teaching and research do not really play a role in them at all. And the instruments used to create rankings do not do justice to the disciplines in the humanities.

3 Quantity Instead of Quality: Current Methods of 'Quality Assessment'

Just how unsuitable current methods, such as making the number and impact of publications measurable and verifiable as quality standards, are for quality assessment in the humanities can be shown by a look at the database of Thomson Reuters (originally called the Institute for Scientific Information and still later Thomson Scientific).⁵ Its data analyses can only work in disciplines where the database contains not only the citing works but also the majority of the cited works. Whereas this is so for up to 100% of the cases in the big disciplines in the natural sciences, this congruence is only 40–60% in mathematics and economics. In the social sciences and humanities,

⁵See <http://science.thomsonreuters.com>.

the percentage is even much lower. For instance, in literary studies, only 11 % of the works cited are also contained in the database.

This example of the difficulties in assessing quality in the humanities and social sciences using instruments that are geared to the natural sciences was pointed out by Christoph Schneider, who for many years headed the department of scientific and scholarly affairs at the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG). In an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in October 2009 titled 'Zauberlehrlinge im Rate- und Ränkespiel' [Sorcerer's apprentices in the rating and ranking game], Schneider wrote on the new measurement madness that just as Midas in the Greek myth turned everything that he touched into gold and thus starved to death, evaluators that are obsessed with ranking lists turn everything into numbers, which soon distorts their reality (Schneider 2009).

It is now sufficiently well-known that quality assessment methods that have in part proved their worth in the natural sciences cannot be applied 1:1 to the humanities and social sciences. The differences between the two in their publication and communication cultures are too great. Often there is very little understanding of or knowledge about the 'other side'.

In a 2006 article in *Die ZEIT*, social psychologist Harald Welzer wrote about his experiences collaborating with a neurophysiologist in an interdisciplinary research project supported by the Volkswagen Foundation. Welzer felt that the often mentioned speechlessness between the disciplines is not it at all; instead it is cultural differences between the disciplines that make it difficult to engage in exchange. Welzer (2006, p. 1, par. 4) asked in *Die ZEIT*:

Wer hätte sich je Gedanken darüber gemacht, dass die disziplinären Vorstellungen von einer "wissenschaftlichen Veröffentlichung" so voneinander abweichen, dass es fast unmöglich ist, gemeinsam einen Text zu verfassen? Für mich als Sozialwissenschaftler war es höchst befremdlich, noch die stumpfsten Hauptsätze, zu denen ich fähig war, von den Gutachtern eines Fachbeitrags als "episch breit" kritisiert zu finden, während im umgekehrten Fall Gutachter sozial- und geisteswissenschaftlicher Journale Phänomene wie die "zunehmende Reaktionsgeschwindigkeitsverminderung" für ziemlich absonderlich hielten.

[Who ever thought that the disciplinary notions of a 'scientific or scholarly publication' would differ so greatly that it is nearly impossible to jointly write a text? For me as a social scientist it was highly disconcerting to have reviewers of a scientific article criticize even the dullest substantive clauses that I was capable of for being 'epically broad', whereas in the opposite case, reviewers for social sciences and humanities journals deemed phenomena such as 'increasing reaction rate reduction' quite peculiar.] (Welzer 2006, p. 1, par. 4)

Whereas in the natural sciences ground-breaking research findings are published in a handful of international journals known to all members of the scientific community in a given discipline, the main form of publication in the humanities continues to be the monograph, which is almost always written in the author's native language. Whereas in the natural sciences people argue about which author of a journal article should be listed in what position, the concept of 'first author' is hardly known in the humanities. In the humanities, excellence is still based mainly on the research achievements of individual scholars and not on the joint efforts of a research team. Current methods of quantitative assessment only very insufficiently take into account these different forms of knowledge creation and publication.

The amount of third-party funding is another example. Naturally, the natural sciences and engineering play in a very different league here, for their work requires in part expensive equipment and materials as well as support by technical personnel. In addition, they pay their research assistants, at least those with doctorates, full salaries. A researcher in the humanities, in contrast, requires mainly time, a good library and possibly money for trips to archives or for field research. For the humanities scholar, the time to conduct research gained by the funding of his position or of a temporary stand-in for his position is as valuable as the costly laboratory equipment is for the natural scientist. But for the third party, this type of research is of course considerably less costly, and in the third-party funding statistics it makes up approximately one-tenth of the amount of third-party funding that is customary in engineering and medicine.⁶ If management boards of universities look only at the amount of external funding granted to researchers, they are in essence comparing apples and oranges. And they are also in danger of taking mere activity measures for evidence of achievement.

At present, therefore, the comparatively recent drive to assess quality in numbers puts the humanities rather at a disadvantage. At least they feel pressured and once again pushed into a corner. But it is clear even to critics of the current rankings and ratings that in the long term they cannot evade this trend towards assessment and evaluation. So the question is how to evaluate quality in the humanities appropriately.

4 Quality Assessment within a Discipline: The Evaluation Culture in the Humanities

Within the academic community assessment takes place constantly: when positions are filled, appointments are made, scientific or scholarly works are accepted by publishers, and third-party funding is granted. This quality assessment is based for the most part on criteria recognized within the community that are not measurable in numbers and that adhere to performance criteria.

A look at peer reviewers' reports provides deep insight into customary quality evaluation methods within a discipline. The Volkswagen Foundation, which funds research in all disciplines, is dependent on peer review of the research grant applications submitted by applicants. Some general things hold for all peer reviewers' reports, such as, for instance, that reports that recommend not funding a project tend to be longer than reports that recommend approving a project for a grant. But also in the peer review and assessment culture there are some fundamental differences between the humanities and the natural sciences. The Volkswagen Foundation sends a leaflet to all peer reviewers asking them to assess the following general criteria in their written reports (VolkswagenStiftung 2013, p. 2):

⁶See here, for example: Berghoff et al. (2009). *Das CHE-Forschungsranking deutscher Universitäten 2009*. Gütersloh, Germany: Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung.

1. Contribution to the further development of research:
What place does the proposal take within the framework of the scientific or scholarly development in the respective area? What is new and original in the approach? What will be the benefit in terms of new knowledge to be acquired?
2. Clear-cut description and consistency:
Does the project proposal reflect the present state of the art? Are the objectives clearly defined and attainable? Are the proposed methods and the working scheme adequate in order to achieve the project goals?
3. Personal qualification:
What about the competence of the project staff, their publication record (also in consideration of their biography, e.g. family phase) and the preparatory work for the project?
4. Adequate extent of time, staff and consumables:
Are the estimated time, staff and consumables really required to achieve the proposed objectives? On which budget items could savings be made or funds be reallocated?
5. Recommendations on the realization:
Does the peer reviewer have helpful suggestions for conducting the project that, should the grant be approved, should be communicated anonymously to the grant applicant?

The Volkswagen Foundation lists these same aspects for the review of grant applications in all disciplines. The standards applied are of course the standards that are valid in the respective scientific or scholarly community from which the grant application comes. The peer reviews of grant applications are usually considerably longer in the humanities than in the natural sciences and engineering, and as to content—depending on the particular culture in the respective discipline—are more critical in their examination. In the humanities, even grant applications that in the end are unreservedly recommended for funding by the peer reviewer are often analysed in detail and criticized. Sometimes, there is an amazing discrepancy between the accompanying assessment sheet, on which the peer reviewer rates the applicant on criteria such as qualifications in the specific field, interdisciplinary potential and research chances for the future, and rates the project on quality, originality and complexity on the one hand, and the peer reviewer's lengthy written report on the other. Even if the peer reviewer gives an overall rating of 'excellent' on the assessment sheet, that does not mean that the grant application will not be taken apart point by point by the peer reviewer in the written report. In-depth examination of a grant application by an esteemed peer is seen as a 'token of love', so to speak, or for the peer reviewers, who see themselves as equals, as a kind of 'matter of honor'. This type of evaluation may work within the discipline, but where humanities scholars are competing with natural scientists for funding, this culture has a negative impact on the humanities' chances of winning. In the Volkswagen Foundation, for instance, this can be seen with the Lichtenberg Professorships, which are open to applicants in all disciplines.

And also in the context of the Excellence Initiative, as well as in several multistage review and selection processes, this difference in the evaluation cultures has all too often had a negative effect on the humanities' chances of success.⁷

But within the humanities, quality assessment functions more or less smoothly. It is usually not difficult for a peer or an editor at an academic publishing company to determine the quality of the work of an individual researcher. But how do humanities scholars communicate their evaluation culture, which is so frequently accompanied by fundamental criticism of the proposed research questions and methods, to colleagues in the natural sciences and engineering? And how do they handle it when they are expected to measure the quality of a department or an entire faculty and have to explain their evaluation results using numbers and facts in a way that the public can understand and verify?

Up to now, the humanities still owe an answer to the question of how quality can be 'measured' in the respective disciplines appropriately. There is no doubt that the instruments for quality assessment used in the natural sciences and engineering cannot be applied to the humanities. Those instruments are also not appropriate for several other disciplines, because often—as it appears, at least—today's rankings and ratings use quantitative and quantifiable criteria and disregard non-quantifiable criteria, as non-quantifiable criteria can be determined only at considerably greater expense. But if there is a demand for reference to qualitative criteria, the following question has to be answered: What is quality in the humanities?

5 What Is Quality in the Humanities? Looking Back

A central topic in humanities research is the analysis of past times, or more precisely, recording, revealing and conveying cultural material as an important part of our cultural heritage. Perhaps to answer the questions as to what quality is in the humanities and how it can be measured we need to look not only at the present and at other countries but also at the past, at the heyday of humanities research in Germany. Why are the late 1800s and early 1900s characterized as a kind of heyday? This is because of the then international impact of German humanities research, the great attractiveness of the German universities for students and scholars from abroad, and the transfer to other countries of forms of teaching and research methods developed in Germany.

What about that impact today? Whereas the natural sciences and engineering have settled on a more or less good laboratory English as the lingua franca, the vast majority of the humanities disciplines remain bound to national languages. The decline of

⁷On funding decisions in the Excellence Initiative, see http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/programme/exzellenzinitiative/allgemeine_informationen/index.html. Accessed 2 May 2014.

German as a language of science and scholarship as well as the decreasing importance of German-language acquisition are inextricably linked. But disciplines that work in and through language cannot simply throw off the respective language. Humanities scholars have to write in the language in which they think, and at the same time they must learn several languages so as to be able to participate in the scholarly debates in other countries.⁸ In a certain way, the following comment by Jutta Limbach, former president of the Goethe Institute, also holds true for the humanities: '*Englisch ist ein Muss, Deutsch ist ein Plus*' [English is a must, German a plus] (Limbach 2005, p. 3). If research quality of the humanities can be measured among other things via international attractiveness, then this does not mean that this attractiveness can be increased by the number of courses of study taught in English offered in the humanities. Instead, it is the bilingual or trilingual courses of study that are conducted in cooperation with universities abroad that can increase the international visibility and attractiveness of the German humanities. Exchange programs and the presence of up-and-coming young scholars and established professors at international conferences promote the networking of the international academic community in all humanities disciplines and make possible the exchange of research findings and methods and, with this, at the same time also make the high quality of humanities research in German-language countries visible in international circles.

Measurement of quality in the humanities along the same lines as in the natural sciences and engineering does not work. The fact that quality in the humanities is more difficult to quantify does of course not mean that quality does not exist. Even though the international attractiveness of the humanities disciplines in German-speaking countries has declined, its transmission has not faded.⁹ Humanities scholars trained here, if they also possess the needed language competency, have good chances on the international research labor market. However, the high qualifications of the up-and-coming researchers say only so much about the quality of a discipline in research and teaching. Only a small percentage of university students enrolled in humanities programs seek an academic career or even have any chance at all to have a successful research career, despite the fact that studies at German universities, especially in the humanities, are still frequently mainly geared to qualifying students for research careers. In Germany, a large part of the humanities disciplines belong to the massively attended study programs with high numbers of students, unfavourable teacher-student ratios and in part dramatic drop-out rates.¹⁰

⁸A conference on the topic *Deutsch in der Wissenschaft* [German in science] was held at the Akademie für Politische Bildung in Tutzing from January 10–12, 2011. The papers were published in a conference volume (Oberreuter et al. 2012).

⁹See Behrens et al. (2010). *Die internationale Positionierung der Geisteswissenschaften in Deutschland. Eine empirische Untersuchung*. Hannover, Germany: HIS-Projektbericht.

¹⁰For a current analysis of the situation of the humanities in Germany, see the recommendations of the *Wissenschaftsrat* on development and promotion of the humanities in Germany (Wissenschaftsrat 2006).

6 The Critical Self-image of the Humanities

Summing up the discussion in and about the humanities in Germany, the following picture emerges: Long disregarded by government, poorly equipped, underfunded and standing practically no chance in the competition for the big third-party public funds, the humanities seem to eke out a pitiful existence.¹¹ The critical self-image of the humanities, which was being clearly expressed already in the 1980s, can be illustrated by the following three quotations:

Joachim Dyck, a Germanist at the University of Oldenburg, lamented in an article in the periodical *Die ZEIT* as early as 1985:

Wo noch vor 15 Jahren die Rede- und Ideenschlacht tobte, gibt es heute als Geräusch nur noch die leise Klage der Hochschullehrer über die dürftigen Schreib- und Leseversuche einer sprachlos gewordenen Generation und den beflissenen Wortschwall von Studenten, deren abgeleiertes Referat vom meditativen Klappern der Stricknadeln begleitet wird, in der Hoffnung, dem geistigen Leben durch handwerkliche Nebentätigkeit noch einen Hauch von Sinn abzurufen.

[Where 15 years ago there was a wild war of words and ideas, today there is only the sound of the university teachers' soft complaint about the meager attempts by a generation gone speechless to read and write and the assiduous torrent of words of students whose reeling off of their presentations is accompanied by the meditative rattle of knitting needles, in the hope of wresting some small sense out of the intellectual life by engaging in handicraft.] (Dyck 1985, p. 2)

In 1989, philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß wrote on the splendor and misery of the humanities as follows:

Über den Geisteswissenschaften liegt nämlich ein wissenschaftsideologischer Fluch, den 1959 Charles Percy Snow, Physiker, Romancier und hoher britischer Staatsbeamter mit seiner Rede von den zwei Kulturen, der naturwissenschaftlichen und der geisteswissenschaftlichen ('literarischen') Kultur in die Welt gesetzt hat. Er tat dies eher nebenbei, in einer Art Sonntagsrede und doch mit ungeheurer Wirkung, vor allem bei den Geisteswissenschaftlern. Diese Wirkung besagt denn auch vielleicht nicht so sehr etwas über den Wahrheitsgehalt der Snowschen Vorstellungen, als vielmehr etwas über die Nervosität und den Selbstzweifel, die die Geisteswissenschaften ergriffen haben.

[There is a curse on the humanities, a science ideology curse that was introduced into the world in 1959 by British physicist, novelist and high government official C. P. Snow in his lecture on 'The Two Cultures', namely, the sciences and the humanities (or literary culture). Snow did this rather incidentally, in a kind of crowd-pleasing speech, but it had enormous impact, especially among humanities scholars. The impact possibly says not so much about the truth of Snow's ideas and very much more about the nervousness and self-doubt that had seized the humanities.] (Mittelstraß 1989, p. 7)

And finally, Hans-Joachim Gehrke, former president of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin, wrote the following in the DFG journal *Forschung* in 2008: 'In vielen geisteswissenschaftlichen Fächern steht man bereits mit dem Rücken zur Wand. Weitere Kürzungen werden in manchen Bereichen unmittelbar zum Exitus führen' [Many humanities disciplines are already standing with their backs to the wall. In some fields any further cuts will lead directly to exitus] (Gehrke 2008, p. 3).

¹¹On the self-image of the humanities, see also Koschorke (2007).

Instead of joining in the chorus of complaints, in the following we will attempt, going beyond the *Gekränktheitsrhetorik* [offended rhetoric] (a term by Peter Strohschneider),¹² to point out not only risks but also and especially development opportunities of the humanities, looking at four areas that all begin with the letter 'I', namely, infrastructure, innovation, interdisciplinarity and internationality. At the same time, we will indicate in what areas quality can be found and possibly also measured in the humanities.

7 Quality Indicators: The Four 'I's

The first 'I' stands for *infrastructure*—the foundation of humanities research. Infrastructure is what the humanities disciplines absolutely should have and should strengthen: Libraries, archives and museums are of fundamental importance for cultural memory and for the study of the cultural foundations of societies. However, these institutions are currently undergoing rapid change and are finding themselves caught between the increasing fast pace in the times of the Internet and the central concern of libraries, archives and museums, namely, the long-term availability of their holdings. By promoting simultaneity, interactivity and open access, the new media also open up quite new possibilities for research. But we need to be concerned about the neglect of the permanence of the documentations—short-term life as a consequence of fast availability! Here the task is to assure and protect quality.

The second I stands for *innovation*. This word has so many facets, all of them associated with renewal, novelty and change, that it is difficult to define the term precisely. For many humanities scholars, who see themselves as custodians of their own and others' traditions (Gehrke 2008, p. 3), the concept of innovation and also nearly any future orientation is the opposite of their central concern. They view as their very own and only task the examination of the past—interpretative learning, understanding and imparting traditions. With this attitude, they are in danger of confirming the popular prejudice, often expressed on the part of natural scientists, that says that the humanities deal too much with the ashes of the past as opposed to what is really important, namely, promoting the fire of the future and driving forward scientific and technical research with quickly measurable results. However, this is a false contrast, because a 'fire of knowledge' fed by the here and now alone is all too frequently likely to turn out to be a rapidly extinguishing flash in the pan. However, we can counteract a just as memory-less and unrestrained belief in progress successfully only if we are willing to always create new perspectives and to learn beyond times and borders, in the conviction that the past must always be present in the present day, if we aim to design the future in a responsible way (Krull 2003, p. 32).

In addition to their classical function of cultural memory—namely, mining, saving and conveying the cultural heritage—perhaps the most important function of the

¹²Strohschneider, cited in Hinrichs (2007).

humanities is preventive thinking. The latter is designed to advance our potential to reflect on relevant issues and, with this, to contribute towards working out future options more clearly. Particularly in times of great uncertainty, preventive thinking is more than ever an indispensable task of the humanities. Here lies the innovation potential of humanities research; the full utilization of that potential is without question a quality criterion for humanities research. This, of course, is a criterion that materializes only in idea-rich communication and interaction both within research and also at the interface of research and the public.

The third I stands for *interdisciplinarity*. In academia itself, the disciplinary orientation dominates: Individual disciplines' reference systems with regard to quality assurance (standards), certification through the awarding of academic degrees, reputation, stability of the field and not least career prospects stand in the foreground. They make up, so to speak, the university's organizational form of knowledge.

But government, economy and society expect researchers to provide solutions for the 'big' questions and not just small and fragmented answers from the perspective of one discipline. In the attempt to establish a balance between the necessary raising of the specialist field profile of the individual discipline and the also necessary bundling of research and teaching capacity, what is practiced for the most part is a kind of contact-free, added-on interdisciplinarity. Due to cost-benefit considerations, usually no effort at all is made to produce common methodological procedures or joint publications. This is even often considered to be extremely career-damaging.

In the age of measurements of science that are oriented towards the leading journals in the different fields, this discipline-specific publication strategy may have an understandable rationality, especially for up-and-coming scholars, particularly as the time cycles of research funding (with still predominantly two- to three-year funding periods) practically promote a narrow focus. However, this should be counteracted against and long-term perspectives should be opened up, so as at the same time to encourage researchers to be willing to take risks and to step outside disciplinary boundaries. If the humanities make their contribution towards answering the big questions and make that contribution visible to the outside world, then they will also be demonstrating their high standards of research quality and importance to society.

The fourth I focuses on *internationality*, which was already mentioned above. Research is inconceivable without international cooperation. At the same time, European integration and the process of globalization are presenting a particular challenge to education, science, research and technology. If the university is to remain attractive and alive as a place for teaching, research and innovation, then it will be essential to develop a culture of intercultural openness and internationality. The humanities in particular can contribute towards the creation of new perspectives and learning options that transcend borders and times.

Particularly with regard to the risks and opportunities of globalization processes there are still a lot of open questions. For this reason, what is needed is stronger research collaboration across disciplinary, institutional and national borders; only on the basis of new knowledge can the future global challenges be tackled effectively. For future research projects, this means that they must make the process of globalization a constitutive aspect of the respective project architecture. This requires, for one, the

integration of researchers from different disciplines and cultures and, for another, steady networking with a circle of researchers worldwide, who can all make their contribution in the horizon of the research question. The other way around, effective utilization of globalization opportunities also makes necessary increasing acquisition of culture-specific knowledge. The humanities should increase their commitment also in this area and should make international exchange, international networking and international cooperation an important criterion for quality assessments.

8 Closing Remarks

Today's almost simultaneous production, processing and communication of new knowledge also makes necessary a new self-understanding of science, scholarship and research: a shift from a homogeneously structured process firmly anchored in institutions and characterized by disciplinary discourses to a more open process that is often kicked off by questions from outside the discipline and characterized by a firm connection to society as well as problem-oriented methods.

There is a reason why the humanities in Continental Europe hid from these changes for too long: The model being followed—the research university and its disciplinary top-level research—made Germany a world leader in science and scholarship in the nineteenth century. But already beginning in the 1890s, scientific developments mainly in the natural sciences and engineering began to break up Humboldt's unity of research and teaching, which had been raised practically to an ideology. In an essay on the creation of the German research university, Brocke (2001, p. 386) wrote that the increasing inability of the institution of the university to do equal justice to the tasks confronting it—classical education, professional training and scientific research—caused a constantly growing discrepancy between the neohumanist conception of the university and the universities' actual structure.

Thus, the problems of the Continental European university system virulent today were already marked out at the start of the twentieth century: the insufficient consideration of new disciplines in the traditional university structure, the increasing specialization in all fields, the impossibility of interdisciplinary research within the given structures (which were mostly vehemently defended by the professors) and not least the resulting explosion of costs in the natural sciences and engineering, which through the necessity for savings had a negative impact on the humanities.

The undoubtedly justified sense of pride in an exemplary and productive university system in the past became a counterproductive mentality of protection of vested interests and blindness to scientific, scholarly and societal reality. For this reason it seems all the more urgent now—despite the many difficulties in everyday university operations—to look forward to new possibilities and options. Particularly considering the globalization processes mentioned above, the humanities can definitely profit from the institutional context of increasingly internationalizing universities. To benefit, however, the humanities must be willing to participate more than before in present-day debates and training needs.

There is no reason for the humanities to remain ‘with their backs to the wall’ or to give up all hope in the face of the supremacy of the natural sciences and engineering. It would also be wrong to overeagerly adopt the research and evaluation modalities of the natural sciences and to artificially create indices for the humanities. The European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH) promoted by the European Science Foundation and the controversies over its methodology and meaningfulness will suffice here as an example to point out that the appropriateness of such measurement methods should be called into question.¹³

One thing is clear: Humanities research requires a different kind of ‘measurement’ and promotion instruments than the instruments used in the natural sciences. If the quality assessment instruments customary in the natural sciences and engineering were applied 1:1 to the humanities, it would only be to the humanities’ disadvantage and would lead to a false snapshot showing only a distorted picture far from reality. Nevertheless, the humanities must make stronger efforts to develop criteria and measurement instruments that go beyond the usual activity measures for assessing good housekeeping. They should make quality in the humanities visible, understandable and recognizable not only within the community in specific disciplines but also to the outside world and to the public. Naturally, it can make sense for the humanities to utilize the usual publication and third-party funding indicators as comparison measures. However, they should be embedded in a clearly structured benchmarking concept that can be used to evaluate comparable institutions—such as, for example, German universities with rich traditions and equipped with a high capacity in humanities teaching and research, such as the universities of Bonn, Göttingen, Heidelberg, Tübingen and Freiburg. A concept of this kind might possibly be realizable also across national borders in the European university and research area and could lead to actual ‘learning by comparing’, if it combined quantitative and qualitative elements of evaluation.

The humanities are very important for the investigation of past problems, the analysis of present-day changes and for coping with future challenges. The humanities can also serve as a reliable compass in times of rapid change if they themselves are clear about their specific quality and significance and demonstrate this to the outside world. The humanities should not respond to the omnipresent call for quality measurement by inappropriately adopting the practices of other disciplines or by fighting a futile defensive battle. Instead, the response should be a committed, interdisciplinary debate, conducted in international dialogue, on suitable methods of transparent quality assessment in the humanities, which know how to utilize quantitative indicators and at the same time combine them with qualitative evaluation methods.

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¹³See, for example, the opinion of philosopher Stekeler-Weithofer (2009).

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Bottom Up from the Bottom: A New Outlook on Research Evaluation for the SSH in France

Geoffrey Williams and Ioana Galleron

Abstract This paper will start with a presentation of the legal French framework for research evaluation, concentrating on the individual level; this first part will also summarize the main oppositions to the idea of evaluation, as they are expressed mainly by unions and other researcher associations. In a second move, we will review the main French actors and practices of evaluation, separating the ‘traditional’ forms of assessment still in use in the CNU, and the recent evolutions caused by the introduction of a dual financing system (through ANR), of an external evaluation of research units by an independent agency (AERES/HCERES) and by the building of a database in the CNRS. In the light of criticisms that can be formulated about all these practices, we will introduce the projects DisValHum and IMPRESHS, dedicated, respectively, to a study of dissemination strategies in the SSH and to case studies of the impact of the research in the SSH. The third part of the paper will therefore be occupied by a description of our methodology and of a few results.

1 Introduction

The French legal framework for research evaluation underwent major changes following the ‘loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités’ (loi LRU). This reform left former evaluative practices in place, whilst bringing in a new evaluation agency, AERES, itself recently replaced itself with a ‘High Council of the Evaluation’ (HCERES). After a presentation of the French research evaluation landscape, as reshaped by the loi LRU, the paper will concentrate on the criticisms that have been formulated about the actors, tools and methods, as well as the place given to the social sciences and humanities (SSH) in this process. In the last section, we will focus on two projects, DisValHum and IMPRESHS, dedicated, respectively, to a study of dissemination strategies in the SSH research and to case studies of the impact of

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the research in the SSH. Because both projects are still under development, we will describe our methodology and will present only a few preliminary results.

2 The Need for Evaluation in the Post-‘loi LRU’ Period

During the last decade, the need for evaluation increased in all higher-education systems. This movement did not spare France, in spite of this country’s tendency to stay away from the general trends in culture-related matters¹ and, more specifically, in education issues, as shown, for example, by France’s non-participation in the European University Data Collection (EUMIDA) surveys (European Commission 2010). Nevertheless, the claims and methods of the so-called new public management did find a favourable echo in France among some politicians and members of the administrative apparatus. In the meantime, the Shanghai rankings came as a shock to the system, and still create a huge discussion about the low ranking of French universities in the top 50 and top 100 league tables (AEF 2013b, ‘Dépêche no. 186447’). A considerable shift in public policy on the higher-education system was, therefore, made under Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency (2007–2012). The most conspicuous and explicitly stated goal of this change was to create 10 highly performing higher-education and research institutions. These were meant to better represent France in international competitions in research and education, as well as to boost academic standards. The latest law on higher education and research (‘loi ESR’, as it is commonly called in France) brought in by the current government did not renounce this objective, nor did it go against the major changes brought in by the 2008 law (loi LRU)—to the disappointment of many left wing supporters from academia who were pushing for a return to the status quo ante.

Following the changes brought about by this new policy the need for a better organized and a more thorough research evaluation became acute in three key sectors.

2.1 *Human Resources*

Under the loi LRU, the universities were allotted new duties and competencies regarding the management of their staff. The novelty is that the institutions are now not only allowed, but also invited, to define human resources strategies and policies covering the three major issues of recruitment, promotion and continuous training. Even if this newly acquired freedom is far from complete—as proved by the autonomy dashboard of universities in Europe, in which France scores low (Estermann et al. 2011)—it opened a whole series of possibilities, which in return prompted a new series of questions to be solved.

Under the previous legal framework, recruitment of research and education staff was performed by ‘commissions des spécialistes’ (recruitment panels). Elected for four years, these panels recruited academic staff, sometimes without any assessment of applications for a position by real specialists in the recruitment field. Now, institu-

¹This is an accepted political doctrine, well known in France as ‘l’exception culturelle’.

tions must put together profile-oriented committees whenever the need arises. These new committees must also justify the ranking of candidates. Thus, both aspects of the hiring process (selection of specialists and candidates), now require a reflection as to quality criteria, even if the rationale is, in most cases, quite flimsy or biased by hidden assumptions.²)’ The change towards position-specific recruitment panels was also designed to address the issue of endo-recruitment, an issue closely followed by the Ministry of Education, which actively seeks to limit this practice. Panels now include a significant number of members from outside the recruiting university, whose external point of view is supposed to prevent favouritism and to ensure the homogeneity of standards throughout the French Higher Education (HE) system. By making the selection process less opaque, the loi LRU has opened new vistas for research evaluation in France.

The loi LRU not only brought changes in recruitment, but also in promotion practices. The possibility to promote staff members is not a new issue for the French Higher Education Institutions (HEI),³ but the novelty is that institutions must now publish their criteria for any decision. Such a requirement was nonexistent prior to the accession to ‘responsabilités et compétences élargies’ (widened responsibilities and competencies) guaranteed by the loi LRU of 2008. Thus, this can be seen as a first step toward a more thorough evaluation of individual careers at the national level, even if numerous voices are to be heard opposing any form of individual evaluation of researchers (CP-CNU 2012; Sauvons l’université 2012). Certain sections of the Conseil National des Universités (CNU), the body that oversees recruitment and promotion procedures,⁴ proved, in such a context, more sensitive to the weaknesses in the methodology applied for assessing files (Garçon 2012) and opened internal

²In SSH disciplines, particularly in literary and language fields, it is not unusual for members of the selection committees to filter applications by considering if the candidate is an ‘agrégé’, for holders of the ‘agrégation’, or ‘certifié’, for holders of the ‘CAPES’. This practice is illegal, as neither agrégation nor certification is among the requirements for recruitment defined by the ministry or fixed by the committees.

‘Agrégation’ and ‘CAPES’ are not academic degrees, but are national procedures, based on a set of competitive examinations through which holders of a master’s degree can become teachers in the state secondary schools (‘professeurs des lycées et des collèges’.

³Every year, the Ministry of the Higher Education and Research defines a number of promotions for every category of staff, whether they be ‘enseignant-chercheur’ (EC, i.e. staff for research and education), teaching staff, or administrative staff. There are three types of promotion for the former: ‘maître de conférences hors classe’ (exceptional senior lecturer), ‘professeur première classe’ (first-class professor) and ‘professeur classe exceptionnelle’ (exceptional professor). Candidates eligible for these promotions establish a file that is assessed by the Conseil des National Universités (CNU), as well as by their institution. Half the promotions are decided by the CNU, while the remaining promotions are awarded by the EC members of the administrative council of the institution. In evaluating both teaching and research activity, the statutory obligations of an EC and engagement in administrative affairs are taken into account, although the accent is supposed to fall more heavily on research. Although the CNU promotion criteria are not clear, promotion at the national level is considered more prestigious because of the danger of cronyism, particularly in smaller institutions.

⁴The CNU took its present form in 1992. It is organized according to groups of disciplines and broad disciplinary sections. Each section has a number, which is why a lecturer may say that he or

discussions about criteria. The thorny question of individual evaluation has recently come up again, even if those doing a pilot study on individual evaluation are very careful to avoid pronouncing the word ‘evaluation’, and talk only about a ‘suivi de carrière [monitoring of careers]’ (AEF 2013a, Dépêche no. 187254). This ‘suivi de carrière [monitoring of careers]’ is also the term used by the most recent law on EC (Décret 2014-997, published on the 2nd of September 2014, see Article 21).⁵

2.2 Funding

Following the 2008 law, the Ministry of Higher Education started to implement a dual financing scheme. Eighty percent of state funding to universities—except salaries—is allocated on an ‘activity basis’, calculated by adding a ‘teaching allocation’ to a ‘research allocation’. These are obtained by multiplying the number of students and tenured academic staff by blocked sums, defined by broad sectors of activity: life sciences, hard sciences and the SSH. The other 20% rewards the relative efficiency in research and education, compared to that of the rest of the system. But not all the academic staff count in calculating the research allocation, either as activity or as performance; only the ‘EC producteurs’, which roughly translates as active researchers, are taken into account. Thus, the assessment of the research activity became of paramount importance following the implementation of this scheme, and more so as an increase in the number of ‘EC producteurs’ translates more easily into financial gains than any increase in the number of graduating students.⁶ At the same time, universities received pressing invitations to increase their ‘ressources propres’ (own funding), especially by tapping into the competitive research funding resource. This reinforced the need, for the leading teams, to identify the most active and innovative researchers as well as the less-performing areas, either for allocating seed money and administrative support or for designing incentives.

(Footnote 4 continued)

she belongs to, for example, the 7th section (broadly, linguistics) or the 9th section (French language and literature). CNU membership consists of nominated members (one-third) and elected members (two-thirds). The latter is based on a list system, i.e., a dominance of trade union elected members. The CNU is in charge of the ‘qualification’, a certification system that allows certain doctoral degree holders to become candidates for senior lecturer positions, or senior lecturers to become candidates for professor positions. The problem is that the qualification process is very much a national barrier to the recruitment of foreign researchers in French academia (Sire 2012), and its maintenance is at odds with the ERA process, endorsed by French parliamentary representatives.

⁵This law is accessible under <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2014/9/2/MENH1418384D/jo/texte>.

⁶In 2010, four more ‘EC producteurs’ in a university brought in the equivalent of a medium salary, while teaching activity required 100 more students to obtain the allocation of the same sum. Calculations were made on the basis of the allocated budget of Université de Bretagne-Sud. Personal data of the authors.

2.3 *The National Grant System*

The creation of the Agence National de la Recherche (ANR) in 2005 radically modified the research units' access to funds and introduced a new actor to the evaluation sphere. For decades, in spite of an increasing concentration of researchers in the universities, 23.5 % of the budget for civil research was directed towards the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS⁷), while universities received less than 5.82 % (Giacobino 2005).

With the new funding scheme, discussed previously, and the allocation of substantial funding possibilities on a project basis through ANR programs, this unbalanced situation changed significantly. In terms of evaluation, mixed teams⁸ (UMR) were no longer automatically recognized as top performers in research, even if, in practice, UMR benefitted from historical prestige when evaluated; at the same time, topics and teams not aligned to the CNRS priorities gained visibility and funding. New forms of evaluation were put into practice, closer to the peer review system used in highly reputable academic journals.

The biggest consequence of the new project-based funding procedure in the ANR grant system is the considerable change in outlook brought about by a radical change from a system in which teams had to work with the more or less generous amount allocated on a quadrennial basis, to a new system in which supplementary resources could be obtained through competitively funded projects. Unfortunately, this revolution only affects the SSH in a limited way, partly because of the long-lived reflexes of managing penury, partly because the available funds are much more limited than the investments in other scientific domains or in technological development. ANR priorities clearly favour scientific domains, which are considered as better contributing to industrial leadership and in responding to societal concerns. The situation is much the same at the regional level, where science policy priorities tend to mimic those established at the national level, which copy, in turn, the European ones, as proved by a recent Ministry discourse and by the subsequent policy document, entitled significantly, 'France-Europe 2020'.

Consequently, a new need for evaluation has arisen, in particular, one stemming from the SSH researchers themselves. The chronic underfunding of the SSH, and, more specifically, of the humanities, can be linked to an insufficient understanding and assessment of their impact outside academia. Impact does figure among criteria taken into account by AERES⁹ and by ANR, both for the evaluation of the research

⁷Created in 1939 to bring together various research groups under a government-controlled institution, the CNRS is now the biggest research unit in France. Researchers are employed directly by the CNRS, which is divided into numerous disciplinary fields with associated institutes. There are also mixed teams that include university researchers, who also have a statutory teaching mission. Until the advent of the ANR funding agency, the CNRS had large block grants. It now must compete for project-based funding, and their research is evaluated by the AERES, something to which they have always objected.

⁸'Mixed teams' gather personnel from the CNRS and from the universities.

⁹AERES was the national evaluation agency created at the time of the LRU reforms. It is now being replaced with an agency under the name of HCERES. See section II for greater detail.

units and for that of projects. However the ANR has no published guidelines for assessing impact, while those of AERES start from a very restricted understanding of the phenomenon. Impact tends to be considered exclusively in the form of patents or spin-offs, two types of results notoriously difficult to obtain when researching SSH topics. In this way, the major contribution of SSH research to the cultural industry is entirely neglected, while the role of SSH research in society is reduced to popularization conferences during specific manifestations ('Fête de la science' is explicitly mentioned), or to contributions to European laws and regulations. The list of impact types published by AERES is not a closed one, but its contours clearly manifest a lack of thorough examination of the matter. The time is, however, not far off when the question of impact will be in the spotlight, as proved by a recent report released by the 'Cour des comptes', the higher administrative court that oversees spending by public bodies and major French NGOs. The report pointed out the considerable budgetary effort made for the research since 2005 and questions whether the nation is getting a sufficient return on its money.

Whether for allocating funds, designing research strategies, supporting teams in their development, or demonstrating value for money, a more objective approach to research evaluation has become a major necessity in France over the last decade.

3 Current Practices and Levels of Evaluation

Unfortunately, in spite of the law and the need for modernized evaluation procedures, many institutions involved in research evaluation remain very vague about their criteria, in general, and about research excellence, in particular. At the same time, the process through which a percentage of the staff of an institution and/or individual persons are labelled as 'produisant' has been constantly questioned but still remains opaque. Finally, a great deal of confusion reigns about the peer review process.

The CNU has been repeatedly criticized over years for its opacity as well as for the weakness of its methodology (Garçon 2012). Because of the large number of applications to be assessed during the qualification or promotion processes, the review process in many sections cannot exceed 10 min/candidate. Furthermore, the relative weight given to the different elements of a CV varies widely from one section to another, and from one evaluator to another. It is to be noted that the way in which CNU members are selected does not require any competency in, or knowledge of, research evaluation, and is indifferent to the scientific merit of the candidates. At the same time, the CNU has no links with entities studying research evaluation, whether these be research laboratories or ministry-related agencies.

The AERES agency, created in 2007 to evaluate French Higher Education and Research Institutes at four levels,¹⁰ never managed to fully implement individual evaluation of EC in spite of the importance of this level in the process of evaluating teams and institutions. The notion of 'EC produisant' does not appear in the official

¹⁰The teaching courses, the research groups, the doctoral schools and the institutions themselves.

document presenting the evaluation principles of a research unit (see AERES 2012a), but it does exist in a separate document which affirms that “[l]’un des indicateurs est une estimation de la proportion des chercheurs et enseignants-chercheurs “produisant en recherche et valorisation” [one of the indicators [of the quality and influence of the research unit] is the estimation of the percentage of researchers and EC active in research and development] (AERES 2012b, p. 1).¹¹ Depending on his or her status, two to four ‘first-class publications’ (‘productions de rang A’) by period of four years are supposed to earn a researcher the ‘produisant’ label; patents, databases and other similar products are accepted as an equivalent. The problem is that there is no clear reason for the number of publications requested (why not one or six, for instance?), while the rigid classification of the outputs is inappropriate in many disciplinary fields (see *infra*).

Besides, the thorough characterization of journals and books, recommended initially by the AERES to define the channels of first-class publications, proved to be highly complicated. Even a simple glance at the produced lists, displayed on the AERES site, reveals tremendous problems. On one hand, these lists have evolved, following major criticisms from the academic community, from being graded league tables (A, B and C or international, national and limited reputation) to a collection of titles whose very inclusiveness¹² is at odds with the ‘first-class publications’ claim. On the other hand, such lists do not exist for many SSH domains, including French language and literature research, which is maybe the most striking example. What constitutes a ‘first-class publication’ depends, therefore, in many domains, on the expert’s opinion. This opinion is formed without any reading of the submitted publications—as none were submitted during the assessment process, whether at the individual or the institutional level. To give but one example, the AERES guidelines claim that only collected works presenting a unified critical apparatus and a scientific deepening of the understanding of an original subject can be considered as ‘first-class publications’. Unfortunately, the question as to how the experts are supposed to verify these requirements on the basis of a simple inclusion of a title (with its references) in the activity report generated by the research unit is not elucidated.

Conscious of these methodological problems, many visiting committees of the AERES do not release ‘produisants’ lists; nevertheless, the Ministry for Higher Education and Research, through its directorate for higher education, DGES-IP,¹³ still applies very precise numbers per domain when it allocates funds to the universities—a somewhat magical operation if individual evaluation does not yet exist. Universities can propose corrections for these figures by signalling forgotten names. Thus, to a

¹¹The notion of ‘valorisation’ covers, in France, all activities of development and technological transfer, but also social and organizational impact, etc.

¹²The former A, B and C journals were merged in the new lists, which are supposed to designate an ‘academic perimeter’. At the same time, researchers can suggest new publication channels to be added to the list. It is not very clear if a further selection is operated among these suggestions (by whom?), or if any suggestion is automatically placed on the list.

¹³DGES-IP (Direction générale pour l’enseignement supérieur et l’insertion professionnelle) is the directorate of the Higher Education and Research Ministry directly responsible for contractual relations and the budget of French universities.

certain point, higher institutions operate as experts in evaluation, conducting their own analysis by applying, or not applying, AERES-based criteria to evaluate their academic staff.

4 DisValHum and IMPRESHS Projects

However unclear the future of the institutional research evaluation in France may be,¹⁴ far too many questions occur in the day-to-day life of researchers and institutions that require clear answers for the problem to be ignored. Such questions include elucidating who is ‘produisant’ and who is not, what is to be considered as performance in research and what is not. Whether in France or throughout Europe, the need for clear responses to key evaluation questions is reflected by the growing popularity of Snowball Metrics¹⁵ in the UK with its emphasis on informed decision-making. It is then significant that some major French research universities are also looking closely at this methodology so as to carry out foresight analysis. However, such indicators cannot work until there is critical research into dissemination practices, and this is particularly true in France. The evolution of the French higher-education system during the last years, as well as the external and the internal pressure, has opened the field for initiatives like the DisValHum and the IMPRESHS projects.

The starting point for the DisValHum and IMPRESHS projects is the realization that many of the problems observed in research evaluation in France stem from an insufficient—and, in certain cases, nonexistent—observation of the domain to be assessed and a lack of engagement with the stakeholders, principally the researchers themselves. The situation is even more acute for the SSH, where the preliminary analyses rarely go further than a few platitudes (‘SSH publish more books than articles’, ‘SSH journals are not included in international databases’, ‘workshops and conferences are important in the SSH’), clumsily taken into account in the various evaluation activities. Both projects seek to contribute to filling this gap. Their intended benefits concern both SSH research, which suffers from its deficit of evaluation, and policymakers by proposing ambitious research policies at the national or institutional level. In general, and despite declarations to the contrary, French evaluation tends to be of a summative type, and is used primarily to allocate funds. Thus, to be effective, it requires a high degree of transparency, and hence faces the challenge of obtaining support from the academic community (Guthrie et al. 2013). Both transparency and support can only be obtained by improving current methodologies, and by listening to researchers at the ground-floor level, who often neither understand the means or the need for an evaluation process, and, generally find the process ill-adapted to their everyday existence.

¹⁴Under the new law (loi ESR, juillet 2013), the AERES has been replaced by a Haut Commission pour l’Évaluation de la Recherche et de l’Enseignement Supérieur (HCERES), whose organization and methods to date differ little from AERES, despite the recent nomination of a new director.

¹⁵<http://www.snowballmetrics.com/>.

Our specific aim is to provide the various evaluation performers (experts of the national agencies, or panels in the universities or research funding institutions, etc.) with objective information about dissemination practices in the SSH, as well as insight into how SSH scholars perceive this dissemination process. We also intend to contribute to the international effort of solving the numerous conundrums implicit in the research assessment of the SSH. This includes issues as the recognition of the specificities of the field, a position that can be seen as somewhat at odds with the claim that they must be taken as an integral part of the whole of scientific effort.

Both projects are supported by the Human Sciences Institute in Brittany (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme en Bretagne), and must be seen as two sides of the same research effort. For administrative reasons, the two projects were submitted for assessment under two separate calls, hence the different acronyms. They concentrate on the dissemination of the research results produced by SSH academics from the four Breton universities. Of the four universities, two, Brest and Bretagne-Sud, are multidisciplinary institutions. Of the two in Rennes, Rennes 1 is predominantly science based, but with a law and economics school, and Rennes 2 is exclusively arts, humanities and social sciences. The four belong to a cluster known as the Université Européenne de Bretagne and share common doctoral schools and joint research groups. Each university retains a degree of specialization in each of the fields studied.¹⁶ For this study, we look only at the output of researchers from the three bigger institutions in Brest and Rennes. The initial results described in this paper refer to a language and literature research group in Brest, a history research group in Rennes 2 and two research teams in the law research group in Rennes 1. The reason for the last one is that this is a large research group with very different research themes. We shall be looking at the output from historical lawyers and specialists in civil law.

Our aims are:

First: to analyse the forms of dissemination, starting from what researchers do (as reflected in their CVs), and not from various preconceptions, based, in most cases, on practices in other fields or on the personal experience of the category designer. The idea is to avoid Procrustean solutions like those imposed by the official reporting, which asks all academics, irrespective of their field, to classify their production in fixed categories. Such categories are not necessarily clear, as there is, for example, no precise definition about what constitutes an international or a national conference. They are also incomplete. Among the most visible gaps are the lack of a category for critical editions or translations, frequent in the SSH, and also the nonexistence of categories such as databases or websites for scientific information. Reporting on forms of engagement with the wider public is also not taken into account, somewhat

¹⁶Since the first conception of this article, new developments have occurred that are changing relations between universities. The universities Rennes 1 and Rennes 2 were to set to become a single university, the University of Rennes, in January 2015. This project has now been abandoned. However, these two universities along with the two other Breton universities, and with three others from the neighbouring Pays-de-Loire region, will now become members of a new institution labelled 'communauté d'universités' (COMUE: community of universities). This will bring in a number of changes the consequences of which on both research and teaching are as yet unclear.

surprising in that this type of impact is supposedly to be evaluated. Categories can also be redundant, in that an invited conference paper can also be declared as an article in proceedings, or disparate when participation to PhD evaluation panels appears alongside authoring of books, without distinction as to the different nature of the exercise).

Second: to observe productivity curves and averages. As shown previously, an EC is considered to be 'produisant' if he or she has generated two pieces of work over a period of four years, but the reason for establishing such a threshold is not made explicit. At the same time, one of the most frequent criticisms of this requirement from French researchers is that a single-authored monograph should not be accorded the same weight as an article of a few pages in a journal, even if it is a highly reputed international publication.

Another aim in analysing productivity curves is to help render more objective value judgments conveyed in terms of 'average researcher' or 'impressively productive', etc. The CNU reports on individual applications frequently resort to such qualifications, whilst there is no clear definition of the benchmarks taken into account.

Third: to analyse collaborative research practices, as reflected by the disseminated products. The objective is principally to study frequency and forms of co-authorship in the SSH disciplines. We are particularly interested in the identification of trans-disciplinary and international cooperation of Breton researchers.

Fourth: to observe channels of dissemination, mainly publishing houses and types of journals favoured by SSH scholars in Brittany, but also channels for oral dissemination. The channels will be further characterized by using objective descriptors, such as presence in international databases or not (for journals), and international distribution or not (for publishing houses), etc. Once again, the aim is to start from the bottom and not from top-down defined lists.

Fifth: to understand the reasons motivating the choice of these channels, as well as of the publication formats adopted. On one hand, we try to understand if maximising the scientific impact constitutes a preoccupation of Breton researchers when they publish; on the other hand, the requirement is to track their ideas about how and why they interact with the wider public.

To fulfill these aims, our first concern has been to build a research products database. A preliminary study was conducted on a small number of CVs published online by researchers in French literature, linguistics, history and law, since these are the domains covered as a priority by the projects. The study was meant to identify the types of research products created by SSH researchers, whether as written material or not. This pilot study was completed by a study of categories selected by various information systems, such as CRISTIN in Norway, VABB-SSH in Flanders (Belgium), or RIN in the United Kingdom. These categories were then tested on a larger scale with the help of the students from the Master of Digital Humanities in Université de Bretagne-Sud. These gathered as many CVs of Breton researchers as possible in the considered domains, helped refine the categories and the structure of the database, and provided the first statistical calculations. For all these reasons, the number of categories finally selected is much larger than that of any of the considered CVs; the differences have proved interesting in themselves as both the focus groups and inter-

views have demonstrated that the non-inclusion of an item in a CV does not translate necessarily into the nonexistence of such a product in the activity of the considered researcher. Its absence is merely a form of self-censorship, sometimes related to the perceived expectations of the external evaluation bodies.¹⁷ In such situations, top-down criteria imposed without a preliminary study of the ground clearly result in a loss in information and, moreover, of potential arguments for demonstrating the social impact of the SSH.

The database, which is currently under development, is organized into four main sections: books, articles (whether in journals or collected works), other written material and non-written material. A comparative list in the appendix of this article shows the types of products it covers, compared to those taken into account by the UK RIN analyses. Authors are characterized by their affiliation (institution and research unit) and by domain (CNU section); a CNU section is conventionally attributed to foreign researchers who cooperate with Breton academics. This has the disadvantage that CNU sections are extremely broad, but does mean that precision can be reached a posteriori using a study of dissemination types and focus group output rather than imposing further subdivision. Co-authorship characterization allows for social network analysis, which will be confronted with a similar analysis conducted on institutional contacts of research units. Moreover, geographical information is available (city and country of authors, and country of publication), making it possible to map visualizations of research contacts.

The basic information as to who, what, where and when is entered in the database. In each section, broad classes of channel and type are used. These remain sufficiently broad to handle all the data included in an individual CV. Only when the database has reached a reasonable size will work start on trying to classify the input in more detail. This is particularly the case with the 'other' section, which contains a rich variety of outputs that probably have a wider social impact than those in a standard CV. As the aim is to get an overall picture of different research groups and different disciplines, we are not concerned with individual researchers, but will look at individual cases when necessary.

The highly time-consuming operation of establishing a database was necessary because information about the SSH production of the researchers in our perimeter is incomplete, unusable, or inaccessible. The institution in charge of producing indicators for research and innovation in France, namely, Observatoire des Sciences et des Techniques, covers the SSH production only on an exceptional basis (Filiatreau 2010) and in doing so relies on the Thomson-Reuters database. If this choice is justified by the benchmarking purposes of the report, it proves clearly inadequate to answer the practical questions listed previously.

As a responsible scientific organization, the CNRS is fully aware of the need for quality checks. Consequently, it has put into place its own internal survey, called RIBAC (Dassa and Sidéra 2011). Unfortunately, this information system concerns

¹⁷Interview with two historians: 'No, I would not put this on a CV, it is not important enough, and in any case not evaluated by AERES.'

only the CNRS, and despite talk of imposing it on universities, it is more than probable that the current government will abandon the idea. This is not altogether a bad thing, as it is far from certain that RIBAC categories are adapted to the EC. The typology of research products also tends to be very restrictive. A full comparison with other databases has not been possible as yet as the CNRS has not made access to the structure publicly available. It is however clear that the non-written material, as well as research reports of all types and forms, are underestimated, which does handicap impacts studies as that envisaged here.

A national database of research output, HAL¹⁸—*Hyper articles en ligne*—that collects research outcomes from French researchers, has existed since 2006 ('HAL: Accueil', 2013) as an open repository. HAL SHS, a specific site for the SSH managed by the CNRS, is used by researchers wishing to put data online. This is not compulsory and, given the extreme lack of user-friendliness, many researchers do not submit; thus, its coverage is only partial. Data can be exported in csv format, but an attempt to nourish our database showed that a great deal of what was necessary, coupled with the non-compulsory nature of the repositories, meant that such an operation is not feasible in the immediate future. The imposed categorization also introduces a further difficulty, as researchers either leave out aspects of their work or misinterpret the categories. Technological changes, as well as policies of major research groups, are rapidly rendering the HAL database redundant.

Lastly, research group activity reports, established for the quadrennial evaluation performed by AERES, have appeared unsatisfactory as evaluation research tools. Not only do many laboratories not publish these reports, but when the reports do exist, the laboratories list only the productions of the previous four years. Inside each report, bibliographical references are far from unified, rendering impossible an automatic translation of the information into our database.

Parallel to the building of the database, which is still in the long phase of manual data entry, a series of group interviews with SSH scholars from various research units in Brittany are being conducted. Appendix 2 lists the questions asked. Recorded interviews are supplemented with notes taken in parallel, which are also transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti.¹⁹ These interviews are intended to help refine the types of products included in the database, and, above all, to retrieve 'natural' hierarchies made between forms and channels of dissemination, to understand who Breton scholars consider when they disseminate their research (the 'ideal reader') and to identify their partners from outside academia. A further aim is to build a typology of publishing outlets and to discover what their purpose may be from the scholar's point of view.

¹⁸<http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/>.

¹⁹<http://www.atlasti.com/>.

5 Initial Outcomes

Following initial focus groups and observations of the database, one thing is very clear: there is an enormous mismatch between what goes into CVs, what is accepted by AERES and how researchers see the dissemination of their research. The interpretations of the AERES classification codes vary widely, between those researchers who put in all their activities, no matter how trivial, and those who leave out activities such as speaking to the general public—considering that the CV deals only with ‘research’. This is summed up neatly by an English language specialist who asked whether pedagogical dissemination (course material) could be treated as research dissemination: ‘Est-ce que la dissémination pédagogique compte, est-ce que les cours comptent?’ [Does pedagogical dissemination count, does teaching courses count?] This is a delicate question to ask in that many SSH scholars write material for the French competitive exams governing entry into the secondary school system as teachers. This is output, but not necessarily considered research, as it is, essentially, a compilation of material to be absorbed by candidates. Textbooks in law do, however, carry a certain prestige.

Preliminary conclusions show that impact concerns vary greatly among the SSH scholars. The representatives of socioeconomic and psychology disciplines are more attentive to selecting publication channels and forms according a career plan, or have a genuine expectation to attract the attention of best international partners in their disciplines; these representatives also are very attentive to the requirements of AERES. Scholars in literature and languages, however, generally lack a clear dissemination policy. This observation is also supported by the fact that the latter clearly find difficulty in defining what can be considered an international publishing house or an internationally reputed journal. Two English-language specialists were very clear about the necessity of publishing in English, while recognizing a certain confusion about the value of certain publishing houses. As one said:

une tendance chez les anglicistes français de publier chez Cambridge Scholars Publishing, la nouvelle maison d’édition à Newcastle, donc on voit bien qu’il y a pas mal de colloques anglicistes qui sont publiés là bas, et autres d’ailleurs, j’ai publié deux là bas donc je trouvais ça très bien, et dernièrement j’ai appris que des chercheurs anglais, eux, considèrent que c’était leur Harmattan, c’est leur Harmattan.

[A tendency among French English researchers is to publish with Cambridge Scholars Publishing, the new publishing house in Newcastle, so we see clearly that quite a few conference (proceedings) of English specialists are published there, and others elsewhere, I published two there, so I found it quite good, but lately I learnt from English researchers that they consider it their Harmattan, it is their Harmattan.]²⁰

The interesting fact is that the researcher in question has published books only in the two outlets, but is now doubting whether this is a good thing or not. Whereas in evaluations, the status of publishers is not currently a discriminatory factor, the scholars are clearly sceptical about the pay-to-publish sector.

²⁰Harmattan is not greatly considered by ‘serious’ French researchers as its reputation is of a pay-to-publish outlet with no real quality control.

There was also a tendency to see the English-speaking journals as having higher standards and better review practices, with one scholar very impressed by the facilities offered when asked to review for a major American journal. This researcher insisted on journals being demanding and using the double-blind review, something found in few journals in France in English studies. Her colleague, however, insisted that more local journals should not be written off as ‘un cahier local n’est pas forcément de mauvaise qualité, de qualité inférieure, alors qu’on peut avoir des articles de qualité excellente dans une revue locale.’ [A local journal is not necessarily bad quality, inferior quality, you can have very good articles in a local journal.] He also pointed out that such journals more readily publish the work of junior researchers, allowing them to get recognition.

Best practices are mainly identified, in the humanities group, as being those recommended by the ministry, less because these are genuinely considered more efficient in developing research, but clearly because ‘it is what is expected’ (interviews with historians and with language specialists). The influence of evaluation, however, is present in the socioeconomic and psychology group, too. One economics researcher, who professed to having no clear dissemination strategy, found herself classed as non-productive because of the restrictive list imposed in her field.

Another problem identified by focus groups as weighing on the research and dissemination practices in the SSH is the themes a research group in the humanities imposes on itself to meet national evaluation requirements. These last only for the four years of a contract, and create a straitjacket for any researcher who is thematically or discipline based. This thematic issue is a particularity of certain humanities groups and is imposed to provide a semblance of homogeneity where heterogeneity dominates. Research groups in languages often bring together researchers from different languages and different periods of interest. They are also broadly divided into researchers in literature, cultural studies and linguistics. The third one is largely grammar, because linguists themselves are in a different CNU section and mostly in different research groups. Thus, whereas a scientific research group may be specialized in, for instance, polymers, a language group will give itself a theme, such as ‘great men’, that is supposed to be a focus point for the four-year contract with the state. This, obviously, requires a fair bit of non-productive acrobatics from the higher-level researchers who have carefully developed a particular area of expertise. As one researcher said:

la place des SHS est telle qu’on est la 5ème roue de la carrosse donc on nous demande de nous agréger à des champs de recherche et des thèmes de recherche qu’on a pas choisis, à [name of university] c’est ça, si on veut être un peu visible, et c’est un problème de [name of research group] par rapport aux autres labos, même si c’est un peu pareil, si on veut être visible, il faut, localement, qu’on *réponde à des appels qui ne sont pas naturellement dans notre champ*. Donc, ce qu’on fait quelquefois avec des déceptions parce qu’il n’y a pas de publication par derrière parce que justement c’est trop large...

[The SSH are excess to requirements, so they ask us to group our areas and themes of research that we have chosen, in [name of university] it is just that. If you want a minimum of visibility, and it’s a problem for [name of research group] in relation to other research groups, even if it’s a bit the same. If you want to be visible, you must, locally, answer calls for tender which are not naturally in your field. Thus, it is what we do, but sometimes with regret as there are no publications forthcoming as the theme is too wide...]

Table 1 Output types across four disciplines in percentages

	Civil law	Law history	History	Literature
Journal	66	32	22	37
Book chapter	18	12	23	30
Encyclopaedia	0	7	3	4
Proceedings	6	21	17	4
Press	0	11	3	0
Miscellaneous	0	6	14	0
Books	10	11	19	26
Total	100	100	100	100

Note Some columns might not sum to 100 % due to rounding

Another interesting observation can be made about the contrast between the practices and perceptions of engagement with non-academic representatives. The discourses present this activity as a one-way process, in which the Researcher transmits Knowledge to a passive Receiver; the idea of a possible influence of stakeholders on one's own research triggered vivid reactions in some cases. But examples cited during the discussion proved that outside academia, stakeholders are, at least in certain cases, valuable collaborators as much as passive receivers. We try to collect precise identifications of these partners to conduct cross-interviews in the manner of those recommended by the ERiC method.

In quantitative terms, the image about SSH publication coming from the database is, for the moment, as in Table 1.

The dominance of books and book chapters is clear in history and literary studies, but these figures must be treated with care. Published chapters may be, in fact, published proceedings, something that is rarely declared in English, but is always noted in the sectors of law and history. The AERES classification lumps together books and book chapters and groups papers in proceedings with either national or international conferences. It is possible that the book section is considered more prestigious by English specialists, hence the preference to declare a chapter to a proceedings article. The absence of certain items may simply show that these disciplines do not deem such outputs as worthy of mention in a CV. The very high percentage of journal publications in civil law also requires caution, because many of these may be short legal commentaries. While we are attempting to track the length of papers, not all CVs give full references. Obviously, miscellaneous publications and books will require close attention. However, what these statistics do show is that simplistic evaluations based on declared data do not give a genuine picture of the complex dissemination patterns across disciplines.

Some factors are becoming clear. Each discipline has its own publication patterns and its own channels, with no similarity across even legal history and history. To date, there is little sign of interdisciplinarity or internationalization. The rule is single authorship for papers and books, except for proceedings and collected works that tend to be co-edited. The exception to this rule was a specific case in law, relating to

scientific and medical fields, but the co-author was another lawyer and not someone from outside the discipline. Most publications are in French, and in France, although there are also major legal publications in francophone Belgium.

The regional university press, the Presses Universitaires de Rennes, is the main publisher for books in history and, to an extent, in literary studies. This publisher has built a strong reputation in regional history and is an obvious publisher for collected works and proceedings. Civil law tends to have its own highly specialized publishers.

As research groups can be fairly homogeneous, it is interesting to look at the 'anomalies'. To date, three examples stand out: a researcher in languages publishing in high-impact journals in a research group that tends to remain at local or national levels; a researcher in history whose subject area, piracy, has strong popular appeal and, therefore, gives numerous radio broadcasts; another is a researcher who has a particular interest in one legal field that links him to a particular form of local court. Other broad cross-disciplinary tendencies also are beginning to appear, as language researchers closer to the visual arts, notably those studying cinematographic productions, have dissemination patterns different from those more concerned with producing scholarly editions. As one researcher said:

Je suis un peu partagé en fait puisque je fais de l'édition de textes, l'édition de textes se prête assez mal à la communication; l'édition de textes a plutôt tendance à la publication directe. [I am of two minds about this in fact as I have worked on critical editions. Critical edition work is not adapted to popularization; critical editions tend more toward direct publication.]

6 Conclusion

The Loi LRU caused a sea change in French research by bringing in internationally certified evaluation procedures. The modification of that law by the Loi ESR watered these procedures down, at the demand of trade unions and a vocal section of the research community. As a result, evaluation procedures that might allow for informed decision-making and foresight activities are now far off. The situation has become more, rather than less, confused, leaving opaque recruitment and promotion practices in place, and not really providing, the tools for a better-informed monitoring of research. Existing systems may work more or less well in some disciplines, where internationalization and, therefore, international benchmarking of research are strong, but this is not the case in the SSH.

Despite resistance in some quarters, greater attention to quality criteria is inevitable as France remains a major player in international research in all fields, including those of the SSH. Current research is leading to better bibliometrics and an understanding of research practices and dissemination. However, although common terminology is developing, the interpretation of that terminology will inevitably remain anchored in national practice, needs and research traditions. Thus, any attempt at benchmarking must be based on an analysis of the situation in each large field and in each country. An overall picture is needed before indicators are imposed. This global picture is

what IMPRESHS is setting out to achieve, starting from one region of France with the aim of launching a larger study across university research in the SSH across France.

There are numerous threads to be followed before a clear picture of French SSH research can be obtained. What is already clear is a very complex situation dominated by national parameters. What this means in practice is that a neutral study based on bottom-up procedures will encourage greater understanding of output types and the motivations of researchers behind their choice of those output channels. Only then will it be possible to equate research outcomes with possible societal impact. SSH research covers a broad spectrum of activities, outcomes and impacts. Understanding this is the key to better quality research evaluation criteria and, therefore, better research. The wealth is in the variety; IMPRESHS aims to help bring about a better understanding of this variety.

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