

Session: Changing publications culture
(A few post-conference comments)

1. EVALUATION

Evaluation is a very important task today in the European research area, as the results may have a significant impact on such matters as (1) financing of research in the humanities in various countries, (2) creation of new systems of research institutions in these countries, (3) financing of the humanities from national budgets, and (4) research opportunities from specific countries in procedures for seeking European grants and work in EU member states.

When we discuss evaluation today we must confront several basic issues: 1. Evaluation methods commonly applied today are designed to meet the needs of the experimental sciences (such as the life sciences and the exact sciences) and do not reflect the specific nature of the humanities. 2. Bibliometric methods of evaluation, so popular in the empirical sciences, are unreliable and, as Milena demonstrated in her presentation, do not address questions about the quality of research. 3. Unfortunately in the humanities so far no consistent conception for evaluation has been developed that is suited to this field of research. 4. A crucial issue in evaluation of the humanities is how to assess publications in various different national languages.

Concerning issues 1 and 2, in the humanities evaluation cannot be conducted using only statistical methods; here I agree entirely with Milena. Bibliometric methods may be helpful, however, particularly for comparing similar types of activity. But they cannot take the place of qualitative methods. Just as research should be assessed using various criteria, so evaluation as such has various goals and target groups. Evaluation in the humanities may concern, for example, the quality of research by individual scholars, the quality of specific research institutes (departments or teams), or the quality of specific journals and other publications. Clearly assessments of all these types of research activity are closely connected, but when we discuss evaluation criteria it is always necessary to take into account what is being assessed in the specific

evaluation. Individual researchers are evaluated in one way, publications another, and institutions yet another.

Concerning issue 3, a problem today is qualitative evaluation, reflecting differences in language and cultural traditions in various fields of the humanities. In my view there is a basic dividing line between research involving the national culture of specific countries (philology, history, ethnography and so on) and research where the subject matter and results are not dependent on the national language. Not all disciplines within the humanities are rooted in a specific national language. There are many disciplines where (perhaps) English could serve as the basic medium. Or to put it another way, in every humanities discipline there are issues (e.g. theory or methodology) which by their nature extend beyond national borders—they are universal and may be formulated without reference to any one ethnic language.

Thus in the area of evaluation there should be a clear distinction between criteria that may be applied in the humanities to disciplines with a transnational character (i.e., where the results may be presented in any language that is the most important for the given discipline, for example conference languages) and those involving disciplines of a national character (e.g. philology of the local languages in each country). This has to do with research (1) that can be conducted only in a specific national language, (2) that cannot be conducted feasibly outside a given country, and (3) whose results would be difficult to publish in international journals, e.g. journals from category A in the ERIH list.

This differentiation among humanities disciplines should be reflected in all evaluation criteria, but it must not be used to justify the closed nature of national subdisciplines. Differentiation of evaluation criteria must serve the purpose of a rational and justified comparison of disciplines.

To achieve this it is essential to apply the bottom-up approach proposed by Milena. I wholly support this position. Constructing evaluation criteria for humanities disciplines in the European research zone requires development of ways to integrate criteria that are important at the local level with criteria in force at the overall European level. European criteria cannot ignore local criteria. Therefore one of the most important tasks for ESF now

should be to develop a list of identical procedures and evaluation criteria recommended for use in all EU countries.

2. ERIH

Journals from the ERIH list present a very similar issue. There is a common perception that all texts published in English are automatically ranked higher than those published in national languages. This is reflected in the division of journals into categories A, B and C, in which the basic criterion is accessibility of a given journal in international circulation (which is automatically greatest in English). Unfortunately, this is regarded as a criterion of quality (accessibility = quality). But we are dealing here with three separate issues: (1) The first issue is the reach of a publication. There are disciplines in the humanities in which the results, even if published in English, will be of interest to only a small group of researchers. For example, studies of the dialects of small national languages (any linguist could provide numerous such examples here) will never be cited as frequently as research on the works of Shakespeare. The availability of the publication in English or the number of citations bears no relation here to the quality of specific research. (2) The second issue is participation in the international exchange of information. The necessity to publish in the humanities area in English (which is contested by many scholars) should not be regarded as a “certificate” of quality of a given product, but as the only sensible way of participating in the international exchange of information about the results of scholarly research. Participation in information exchange is one of the most important things today for the humanities in Europe. (3) The third issue is the quality of publications, which must be compared with the quality and results of research in the specific discipline.

Everyone knows that publication in English of even the most important articles concerning issues specific to national cultures (starting with philology) is not necessary or even possible. Everyone agrees as well as that it is pointless to translate them into English in their entirety. But the issue still remains of exchange of information about works in the humanities among all European countries.

It seems to me that a solution could be to require inclusion in all ranked humanities journals of extensive abstracts or summaries in English (no less than 30% of the text). An extensive abstract in English should be a necessary condition for positive evaluation of humanities publications. To facilitate this, a portal could be established in each country for abstracts (in English) from humanities publications, and then a network of these national sites would be created under ESF. A European portal of abstracts from humanities publications could also be created. Why just abstracts? This makes it possible to avoid copyright problems that may arise in the case of full publication (open access is not yet the universal standard).

3. DIGITAL EDITING

Digital editing should be designated by ESF as one of the basic elements of infrastructure in humanities research (particularly philology). There is still a common belief that the humanities require no infrastructure. Providing the conditions for conducting courses and research involving electronic publications should also be a criterion for assessment of a given research institution (department, institute or university).

4. COPYRIGHT

We did not discuss this issue during our conference, but I think it should be closely tied to the concept of changing the publications culture, and it merits attention. The issue here is the dramatic difference in protection of intellectual property rights between the old and new EU member states. The ESF should take steps to foster establishment of rules for protection of intellectual property rights that are uniform for all EU countries. This is an issue of huge importance in many fields of research, particularly in the humanities (citing, copying, reproduction, protection of ideas, project topics and so on).

Włodzimierz Bolecki
22 December 2009