

Joint funding bodies' review of research assessment

Contribution on behalf of the European Ethnological Research Network

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This response is based on discussions among participants in the ESRC Research Seminar Group in European Ethnology, which comprises active researchers at all levels of their career, including the heads of four European ethnology units within HEIs (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Sheffield and UWE). There is strong support for the setting up of a working party on how European ethnology should best be treated for RA purposes, especially as it crosses the humanities/social science boundary. Our response addresses those questions in Annex B of the consultation document that have featured prominently in our discussions, and on which there appears to be a strong enough consensus among the participants. While the ESRC Seminar Group is working towards it, there is no formally established learned association in this field in the UK as yet, and this response cannot therefore represent a corporate view.

Group 1: Expert review

The idea of expert review, in the sense defined for this consultation, is certainly to be welcomed in principle. For a small, emerging interdisciplinary field like European ethnology, however, this brings dangers that need to be considered carefully.

There has to-date been no panel for European ethnology, nor for any immediately cognate field, such as folkloristics, with the effect that European ethnologists have been returned to a wide array of panels with often very different research cultures and priorities. This can lead to a situation where individuals are forced to re-direct their research away from review by their international peers in order to meet the expectations of a different disciplinary culture. To give an example, the key journals in European ethnology are produced on the Continent, where they are widely read. They are peer reviewed, but follow a different style from Anglo-American practice. Moreover, in a time of tight budgets, most of these journals are not widely available in British university libraries, and thus may be regarded by experts from other fields as inferior outlets for publication, compared to journals read more widely in the UK.

Assessors need to understand the specificity of the research culture they are reviewing. It would therefore be desirable that each field is assessed by its own panel. However, this may not be practical nor economical. In the absence of a panel of their own, small fields like European ethnology therefore need to be represented in an appropriate way within one or more subject panels, or sub-panels, in the new panel structure, and HEIs need to be encouraged to return (or cross-refer) suitable groupings accordingly in their submissions.

It may be worth considering to what extent panels could be internationalised. Rather than just seeking advice from foreign experts on, for example, top-ranked UoAs, as some panels did in the 2001 exercise, should not some panels at least be composed of an international group of scholars? For a field like European ethnology, far more established on the Continent than in the UK, and also well-understood in the US, this would be an obvious choice, to avoid the possible pitfalls of a small group assessing itself. Other interdisciplinary fields may also see the benefits of such an arrangement.

Group 2: Algorithm

Any assessment based solely on quantitative metrics would unfairly disadvantage up-and-coming fields and research groupings/HEIs because it inherently favours the larger, more established and better resourced units, unless a measure is found to take account of this distortion. Assessment based on counting exercises is in danger of stimulating output at the expense of quality.

Group 3: Self-assessment

No comments made.

Group 4: Historical ratings

No comments made.

Group 5: Crosscutting themes

A key issue here is the allocation of rewards/penalties, and how these filter down to research groups within departments/schools. If the RAE is linked to the funding for each subject, then the needs of fields without a panel of their own, whose researchers are returned with larger and more powerful groupings, must be taken into account.

It follows from what was said on expert review that each different subject or group of cognate subjects should be assessed in a way that is appropriate to that subject or group. A complication arises from the interdisciplinarity of some fields, such as European ethnology. The term “interdisciplinarity” properly means “between” disciplines. RAE panels in the past have been “multidisciplinary” at best, with their members, by and large, having distinctly disciplinary backgrounds. Multidisciplinary work differs significantly from interdisciplinary research. The epistemological issues are not relevant here, but the fact that genuinely interdisciplinary research is often difficult to place in mainstream disciplinary journals certainly is.

Genuinely interdisciplinary work “between” disciplines is at present insufficiently supported. This is particularly noticeable in a field like European ethnology, which in addition to being interdisciplinary sits between several humanities and social science disciplines, and hence between research councils. In the absence of any clearly attributable QR funding arising (potentially at least) from RAE performance, such fields need increased support from the research councils in order to develop.