

ESF/AHRC 'update' meeting on the ERIH, London 27 February 2008

Helen Beebee, BPA, March 2008

This document summarises and comments on the key issues raised in the discussion at the above meeting. I have tried to remain neutral, simply summarising the points and responses made, supplemented by background information where appropriate. Occasional comments of my own are in square brackets.

Speakers/contributors

Philip Esler (Chief Executive of AHRC)
Yvonne Hawkins (Director of Knowledge and Evaluation, AHRC)
Rüdiger Klein (ERIH Steering Committee)
Lin Foxhall (Archaeology Expert Panel, ERIH)
Barry Smith (Philosophy Expert Panel, ERIH)
Michael Worton (ERIH Steering Committee)
also present: Pik Wang (AHRC), Julianne Nyham (ERIH).

Delegates

Representatives of 17 subject associations and learned societies, covering (amongst others) philosophy, classics, art history, archaeology, history, music, drama, theology and religious studies, literature, law, and linguistics.

Background

The European Reference Index for the Humanities project, run by the European Science Foundation (of which the AHRC is a constituent member), has constructed (or is in the process of constructing) provisional lists of journals for different A&H disciplines, rated as 'A', 'B' and 'C' as follows:

Category A: high ranking international publications with a very strong reputation among researchers of the field in different countries, regularly cited all over the world.

Category B: standard international publications with a good reputation among researchers of the field in different countries.

Category C: research journals with an important local/regional significance in Europe, occasionally cited outside the publishing country though their main target group is the domestic academic community.

These lists are publicly available (as is general information about the ERIH); see www.esf.org/research-areas/humanities/research-infrastructures-including-erih.html.

Learned societies and subject associations were consulted on the formulation of the lists; however many of them (including the BPA) declined to respond, on the grounds that they were sceptical about the rationale for the existence of the lists.

Main issues raised in the discussion

1. Use of the ERIH lists

The AHRC reported that they had already been using the lists in returns to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, by selecting a random sample of articles in Category A journals and seeing which countries the authors were based in. They reported that overall the UK came out second internationally, after the US. More generally, it was pointed out by the AHRC and expert panel representatives that Arts & Humanities get a relatively small proportion of research funding, both within the UK and Europe, and it was claimed that this situation is unlikely to change unless there is some robust and agreed way of measuring the quality of research in A&H disciplines.

The AHRC reported that the purpose of the lists was *only* to provide a measure, at the national level, of the standing/quality of A&H disciplines (individually or collectively), and that they did not intend the journal categories as a basis for metrics in the RAE, or indeed for any assessment of research quality at sub-national level in the future.

However there was concern from the subject associations/learned societies (SAs) that, given that the lists are public, the use of the lists is outside the control of the AHRC, and that they could be – indeed there is anecdotal evidence that they are already being – used for such assessment by other bodies, e.g. promotions committees. The AHRC said that they were opposed to any such uses. [However on the ESF website it says: ‘The ERIH Steering Committee and the Expert Panels therefore advise against using the lists as the only basis for assessment of individual candidates for positions or promotions or of applicants for research grants.’ Note the ‘only’.]

2. The journal categories

The main concern of the SAs was not the existence of lists of journals, inclusion in which is based on minimum standards (e.g. blind refereeing, international editorial board, etc.), but the categorisation into A, B and C.

On the A/B distinction, the ESF itself is unclear about what the distinction is supposed to amount to. The official objectives of the ERIH (gaining more visibility for Humanities research in Europe; disseminating European research in the Humanities worldwide; encouraging ‘best practice’ in the publication of Humanities journals; and providing a simple benchmarking tool for comparisons at aggregate level) make no claim to be distinguishing between journals on the basis of the quality of their contents; however the formal criteria for the A and B rankings contradict this (A-rated journals being ‘high ranking’ with a ‘very strong reputation’, and B-rated journals being ‘standard’ with a ‘good reputation’). [The AHRC’s own use of the lists so far (see (1) above) seems to indicate that the distinction is based on quality.]

There was some discussion of this issue; some SAs suggested that if the purpose is not to measure quality, use of ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ (where it is hard not to think of A as better than B, which is in turn better than C) was inappropriate, and some more neutral nomenclature should be found.

Concerns were also raised about (a) the possibility of ‘fossilisation’ (to which the response was that continued feedback from academics etc. would lead to updated lists) and (b) the effect of the lists on the areas of research that are pursued. [For example some areas of

Philosophy – particularly mainstream contemporary analytic philosophy – are very well represented in Category A, while others have little or no representation in Category A.] The response to this was that – as mentioned above – the existence of the lists is not intended to guide e.g. promotion or appointment decisions.

On Category C, it was noted by the SAs that there is considerable ambiguity in the definition of this category. On the one hand, the AHRC noted that the category allows for the recognition of journals that are not published in English and whose international scope is therefore likely to be limited. On the other hand, some SAs pointed out that in their own field or sub-field, sometimes the very best international journals are not published in English and should not be given a C rating. In other words, ‘national’ can mean two different things: either (a) that in fact contributors and readers are mostly confined to a particular country, even though the journal is published in English or another widely-spoken language [cf the standard RAE use of the term ‘national’], or (b) there are linguistic impediments to the journal having international scope, which may be independent of the quality of the articles it contains. The AHRC stated that Category C should not be regarded as inferior to Categories A and B; just ‘different’. [But this is not at all clear from the definition of Category C; moreover the contents of several C-rated Philosophy journals are wholly or mostly articles written in English.]

3. List criteria/robustness of panels’ judgements

Concerns were raised about the way in which specialist panel members were selected, and about both the particular ranking judgements made by panels and the criteria by which those judgements were reached. The AHRC acknowledged that there were some problems here, but said that many of the problems were caused by a lack of engagement in the process by some of the SAs: a higher level of engagement would resolve many of the outstanding problems.

One SA representative suggested that the lists could be compiled on the basis of clear, publicly accessible and purely quantitative data: acceptance rates, circulation, editorial practices (double-blind peer review, open submission, etc.), and so on. The AHRC responded that such quantitative data is very hard to come by.