

Dear Professor Esler

I would like to thank you and your colleagues from the AHRC and the ESF for the helpful meeting concerning the European Reference Index for the Humanities back in February.

My colleagues and I in the British Philosophical Association have several questions arising from this meeting, and we would be very grateful if you could clarify the AHRC's position.

1. *Is the distinction between A-rated and B-rated journals a distinction based on the quality of the journal, so that a paper in an A-rated journal is, in the absence of any further information, assumed to be better than one published in a B-rated journal?*

The AHRC's position on this is extremely unclear. On the one hand, we were told explicitly at the meeting that the AHRC needed some kind of overall measure of the quality of UK Arts & Humanities research, and that it had already used the ERIH 'A' list for this purpose in its reporting to DIUS. The point that A&H disciplines need to be able to demonstrate the quality of research in order to be able to compete effectively for a reasonably portion of EU funding was also pressed by Barry Smith at the meeting. Finally, it is clear from the criteria for A- and B-rated journals that the distinction is intended to be based on the quality of the journals (and so, by implication, articles published therein). For example, A-journals are 'high-ranking' with a 'very strong reputation', while B-journals are 'standard' with a 'good reputation'.

On the other hand, you yourself said at the meeting – I wrote this down – “ERIH has nothing to do with the assessment of research excellence of the UK”. Moreover, the objectives for the ERIH are stated as:

- Gaining more visibility for Humanities research in Europe
- Disseminating European research in the Humanities worldwide
- Encouraging 'best practice' in the publication of journals in the Humanities (peer-review)
- Providing a simple benchmarking tool for comparisons at aggregate level

These make no mention at all of the quality of research or the journals in which that research is published. It is unclear how a list with the only above objectives could be used as a tool with which to demonstrate the quality of A&H research in general, and it is also unclear how these objectives are in any way served by the A/B distinction.

2. *Does the AHRC believe that the description of the criteria for Category C journals is accurate?*

The official ESF description of Category C journals is “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.”

This again strongly suggests a fudge on the issue of quality. Quality is not mentioned anywhere in this description; however the ESF's own summary guidelines state that Categories A and B require all three of 'consistently high-quality scholarly content', 'broad consensus ... concerning international status and visibility' and 'a genuine, varied

and regular international cohort of contributors and readership'. The first two of these criteria are clearly quality-based. And since there are certainly some C-rated journals which satisfy the third criterion (for example *Environmental Values*), such journals are obviously in Category C for reasons that have nothing to do with being 'regional' or having a largely domestic audience.

Indeed, it is difficult even to make any sense of the notion of 'local/regional significance' in a discipline like Philosophy, where 'local' or 'regional' issues are rarely addressed. Presumably the same point applies in disciplines such as Classics, and applies to at least some extent in all A&H disciplines. And for journals published in English, for example, there is no reason why a journal should be considered as 'targeting' only the domestic academic community. Indeed those journals that are published in non-English speaking countries but whose contents are in English are, presumably, precisely *not* intending their 'main target group' to be the domestic academic community.

3. *Is the AHRC concerned about unintended consequences of the ERIH, and if so, what action does it intend to take to minimise these consequences?*

There is anecdotal evidence – some of which was mentioned at the meeting – that the ERIH is already being used, e.g. by universities in making promotion or tenure decisions, for purposes which, we were told at the meeting, the AHRC does not condone. We note that the 'knowledge and evaluation' page of the AHRC's website states: 'The ESF and its Expert Panels strongly advise against using the lists as a basis for assessment of individual candidates for employment or funding'. However, the FAQ section of the ESF's ERIH website states: 'The ERIH does not encourage using the lists as a basis for calculations in order to assess individual candidates for positions or applicants for research grants'. There is, of course, a large difference between not encouraging something and strongly advising against it. And, it must be said, in both cases the information is not exactly highly visible; it would be extremely easy for someone to use the ERIH lists for the assessment of individuals without realizing that such use is not condoned or indeed encouraged by the AHRC or the ESF.

4. *Does the AHRC support the ESF's intention to extend the ERIH project to edited collections and monographs?*

Thank you for your attention; I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Helen Beebee, on behalf of the BPA