



Research assessment in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Eleventh Workshop - AQU Catalunya with the Catalan Universities

University of Barcelona, 28 - 29 January 2010

Presentation

The central theme of the Eleventh AQU Catalunya Workshop, organised in collaboration with the Catalan universities, was “**Research assessment in the Humanities and Social Sciences**”. The objective of the Workshop was to create a context for general reflexion and discussion on research to provide for the identification of proposals to enhance assessment and evaluation, with the intention of creating greater consensus within the scientific and academic community in Catalonia.

The more than three hundred participants in the Workshop were organised into workgroups (*Group 1: Philosophy, History, Art, Anthropology and Geography, Group 2: Philology, Translation and Interpreting; Group 3: Education; Group 4: Economics and Business Studies, Political Science and Sociology; Group 5: Psychology; Group 6: Law; and Group 7: Library Science, Documentation and Communication*), each one of which reached conclusions on how to enhance the assessment of research within their respective fields of knowledge. These conclusions can be consulted on the AQU Catalunya website (http://www.aqu.cat/activitats/tallers_jornades/taller_2010/conclusions.html).

The most significant generic contributions, which were shared by the majority of the workgroups, are set out in this final document, the intention of which is to be the basis of reasoning for proposing the necessary changes regarding approaches to assessment, the assessment model and its implementation.

The main aim of the proposals put forward can be summed up as ways to perfect assessment and evaluation. It is therefore essential for quality assurance agencies in Catalonia and Spain to agree on how the model can be improved, given that a basic requirement for it to function properly is consistency, not uniformity, in the system.

The commitment made by the Agency from now on, and taking the conclusions of the Workshop as a starting point, is to promote broader debate in Catalonia and Spain so as to set in place a system for assessment and evaluation that is more in line with the specific characteristics of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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The framework for discussion¹

Various principles and criteria for assessing humanistic social research

'Appraisal' and 'assessment' are close synonyms of each other, so we need to ensure that, in principle, the appraisal that we believe humanistic social knowledge should be given is not directly contradicted by any submission to an assessment or evaluation in which its characteristics are not just given inadequate consideration, but are even ignored. In no way does this mean resisting or questioning the advisability of assessment and evaluation, the respect for the demands of public service that is our duty, its fairness or even the systemic need for evaluation. It is however a matter of reflecting and generating processes for dialogue and using procedures that are as widely acceptable as possible to prevent assessment from deteriorating into a dogmatic or ideological process – that falsely disguises reality – or quantitative reductionism that is in nonsensical contradiction with the nature of the knowledge being evaluated.

Certain minimum generic principles and criteria can be pointed to that, in a more specific way, outline the debate on procedures for assessing and evaluating humanistic social research

The assessment of humanistic social research is not reducible to other respectable and respected ways of assessing research; its singular nature must, above all else, allow for considerable internal variety.

The criteria for quantitative measurement should always be subordinate to the qualitative criteria of peer review in which an appraisal is possible.

The appraisal of individual contributions should in particular stand out, given that research practice is essentially individual because of the nature of knowledge, which is reflective, analytical, critical and also creative

Research – and ultimately its transfer – published in journals that are not recognised internationally, especially if the research is linked to specific aspects or cultural characteristics of the place that it originates or refers to, deserves meaningful appraisal of its content.

The people responsible for assessing and evaluating research need a high degree of intrinsic or specialised knowledge of the subjects they are assessing, because they are expected to appraise the quality more than the quantity of the works submitted for assessment.

¹ This section is an adaptation of the last fragment of the paper by Dr. Joan Manuel del Pozo, on *The Assessment of Humanistic Social Knowledge*, from the *Workshop on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, who was invited, in the keynote speech, to establish a theoretical framework for the workgroup discussions.



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It is one thing to defend and practice the transfer of knowledge from the world of research to the productive world and something quite different to give maximum value to this transfer which, in reality, is a simple derivative of basic or non-oriented research that is fundamental in both scientific and, it goes without saying, humanistic social spheres. One elemental meaning of the autonomy of knowledge production – of whatever type – should distance any consideration of its value from its productive performance, as this would imply the predominance of market values over science, which is evidently more ideological and not at all scientific

Pluralism is inherent to knowledge production in the contemporary world: in fact, as causalistic determinism weakens in the world of natural science, the opening up and diversity of this knowledge become clearly expressed. The same occurs with the breakdown of the norms of humanism and the fragmentation of the social sciences: it is a song to plurality, diversity and difference. In this context, it is natural for assessment procedures to be established that respect not just the great difference between the scientific and natural science spheres, on the one hand, and the humanistic and social spheres, on the other, but also the great differences within each of these.

After having remarked that the radical epistemological distinction between the 'two cultures' makes no sense – everything is science if there is method and a critical spirit – it should be made quite clear that – precisely in honour of the methodical and critical spirit, which above all else is what prevents there from being confusion – uniformity in assessment makes no sense if, as we have seen, the fundamental epistemological value is stated functionally in widely diverse methodologies, vague objectives, heterogeneous research practices and completely different channels and ways of dissemination. Once again in human life the challenge is an encouraging one, namely, to enjoy the fundamental unity through different pathways and approaches – and procedures.

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Contributions and input for enhancing research assessment in the Humanities and Social Sciences

INTRODUCTION²

Far from questioning the advisability of assessment, which they considered to be a requirement considering the necessary allocation of resources, the quality assurance of research and accountability, the participants in the Workshop did however share the opinion that **the mimetic application of assessment and evaluation criteria and methodologies used in the fields of science and technology generates dysfunctions within the Humanities and Social Sciences.**

Various reasons are given for this. For example:

- These disciplines contain a wide diversity of fields of knowledge and research traditions, with different levels of consolidation within the fields themselves.
- Research is often clearly delimited according to the place that it originates or refers to.
- Evaluation mechanisms and common benchmarks have not been agreed to.
- The book or monograph, one of the main dissemination instruments in these disciplines, has not achieved its deserved level of identity given the absence of a clear and precise evaluation system.
- Very often, and in general, the rhythm and time taken by research are much longer, as is the time of validity of the resulting work

It is therefore necessary to recognise the pluralism and specific nature of these fields and to **construct evaluation criteria that are appropriate to this diversity.**

Details are given below of **the main contributions**, which are generic to the Humanities and Social Sciences as a whole and lay the foundations for the possible introduction of modifications regarding the approach to assessment, the assessment model and its implementation. Before this, in the first section on Assessment Policy, other more general aspects are set out that, although they do not fall within the scope of jurisdiction of AQU Catalunya, were dealt with in the workshop and should be taken into consideration, due to the fact that assessment and evaluation processes should indefectibly be seen as being part of the political and strategic context of academic staff in the higher education system in Catalonia.

² **Note.** By *disciplinary fields*, reference is made to the Humanities, Social Sciences, etc.; *discipline* refers to History, Philosophy, etc; and *field of knowledge* refers to the assigned fields of academic staff since the post-University Reform Act (1983), such as the Didactics of Social Sciences, etc.

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ASSESSMENT POLICY

In overall terms, and in all of the sciences, it is important to point out that the introduction of research assessment processes, and the consequences that could result from this, may **modify the standards of work and the objectives of researchers**. It could even lead to confusion regarding whether the purpose is to publish research or the advancement of knowledge or improvement of social and/or economic conditions.

It is necessary for the corresponding authorities to be particularly **curious, consistent and flexible** in their approach to assessment policies and processes (in relation to both research groups and individuals) in order to safeguard the difficult balance implicit to incentive given to research.

Assessment policies should take into account the context for opportunities for carrying out research. Existing funding policies and involvement in vigorous research groups are aspects that can condition the opportunities for carrying out research. Belonging to a highly productive group, where the number of authors of papers is high, increases the possibility of future citations.

When talking about the quality of research, it is accepted that the fundamental criterion lies in **the originality and relevance of the knowledge that it generates**. Other factors that play a role may be: its interdisciplinary nature, the idiosyncrasy of research groups, their experience and capacity to train new researchers, and their capacity to foster the setting up of networks and the exchange of knowledge and strategies.

The research group as an assessed structure (consolidated groups, etc), which is particular to the higher education system in Catalonia, makes possible group and interdisciplinary work, it enables young researchers to enter the research system, and it provides for the obtaining of funding and the optimisation of research. While the current system is structured around research groups, it is important to remember that there are other types of research unit, such as **individual researchers**, who work more or less on their own due to the particular characteristics of their field of knowledge, and **more collective ways of doing research** and publishing it, such as networks. Policies that are organised should **take into account these other types of research unit**, which are also important.

In the case of projects being developed by researchers, and aside from purely technical evaluation criteria (such as the distinction between competitive and non-competitive projects or the funding body, amongst others), **an evaluation should be made not just of the published results, but also of other aspects of the research process itself, one important factor to be particularly taken into account being the originality and interdisciplinary nature of the work**. In addition, and in relation to the assessment of research projects, there is also the need **to extend the deadlines for the evaluation of published results**, given the very specific nature of the rhythm of and necessary time for research.



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Lastly, it is considered **essential for post-research**, i.e., the returns on research, **to be assessed**, especially publicly funded research.

During the Workshop it was highlighted that **the definition of the types of academic staff required in Catalan universities needs to be improved**. In concordance with these types of staff, and given that evaluation establishes a system of incentives that conditions both scientific and academic activity, it was considered that **the grounds for assessment need to be better established**. It would be positive to specify whether QA agencies should assess levels of excellence or if they should focus on the accreditation of minimum requirements.

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EVALUATION

The evaluation system

The system

The practically unanimous opinion was that **the evaluation system should be complementary between assessment by indirect and direct mechanisms**. The participants of the Workshop were clearly in favour of a mixed system, in which evaluation is based on indirect assessment, with direct assessment only being applicable in cases of doubt, or where the evaluatee, in order to pass the evaluation, wants direct evaluation of a significant piece of work in his/her research.

Language

Evaluation systems should enable the quality of research to be assessed, **without prejudice to the language in which it is written or the place that it originates or refers to**. The necessary measures to prevent such research from being discriminated against should be set in place.

The object of evaluation

Books, monographs and their evaluation

Stress was put on **the monograph's role as a highly important instrument that is used to channel most research** in these fields. Books, monographs and book chapters should be assessed according to the different fields and on the basis of quality criteria. It is considered that, in most of the humanistic and social disciplines, monographs are not replaceable by articles. Evaluation processes should therefore be capable of dealing with the realities of this.

This recognition implies the **need to set criteria that establish the quality of academically oriented publishers in the university and private sectors**. A list needs to be defined of publishers that comply with quality mechanisms and criteria in publishing. Several criteria to be taken into account are: the use of independent reviewers on top-level editorial boards, processes like peer review, internationalisation, etc.

Quality criteria for articles

During the Workshop, emphasis was put on the **importance of articles being published in journals with impact indices**. Although the value of indices like the JCR was not discussed, there is sufficient empirical evidence of their limitations in the humanities and social sciences. It was also pointed out that it is not easy to rank journals in these indices, and there are some that do not even appear, thereby making it difficult to assess the work of researchers.

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Databases therefore need to comply with clear and objective quality criteria in order for **journals that are included in them to be assessed**. There also needs to be **periodic reviews of quality indices/criteria** as a consequence of the results of evaluations. It is suggested that progress is made in incorporating criteria that take into account the rapid expansion of digital publications and the dynamics of Open Access.

In order to establish benchmarks for set periods of time, consideration needs to be given to the usefulness of empirical studies to analyse the situation of researchers.

When an evaluation is to be carried out, **account should be taken of different indices**, such as ISI, SCOPUS, etc., in order for there to be an overview of the evaluation as a whole.

Specific reference is made to the system of classifying scientific journals known as **CARHUS+**, **with the call for this to be reviewed and completed** by taking into account the abovementioned criteria, together with other indices in Spain (RESH, IN-RECS and MiAR) and at the international level (ISI and SCOPUS).

Knowledge transfer

It was established that **a definition is required of what is understood by knowledge transfer** in the Humanities and Social Sciences, given that, as a concept, there is no general consensus. Progress therefore needs to be made in its conceptualisation to enable **recognition of the social value of knowledge that is produced** and to structure the mechanisms for evaluating this.

Criteria to be taken into account in this definition could include: its social impact, applicability, its relationship with the research itself, irrespective of the format, etc. Lastly, there is a need for the assessment of **commissioned research** in private enterprise, bodies and institutions, etc. as knowledge transfer, **provided that this research can be disseminated** either totally or partially, given that it is difficult to establish patents in these fields.

The evaluation procedure

The participants in the Workshop were unanimous in that information on **the procedure, the reviewer selection process, the rights of the evaluatee, and the evaluation criteria needs to be precise, objective and transparent**, and that it should be made available in sufficient time prior to the evaluation. The transparency and objectivity of the process should give a basic picture of the result of the evaluation, so as to reduce the degree of uncertainty concerning the possibilities of passing.

The call was made for there to be **continuity over time** regarding the evaluation criteria.



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Although the composition of a review panel needs to be multidisciplinary in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the call was made, in the case of indirect evaluation, for **reviewers to be from the same discipline** as the evaluatee. In the case of direct evaluation, **reviewers need to have a profile that is as close as possible to the field of knowledge**.

The importance of sufficiently justifying assessment resolutions was also pointed out, the aim being to better orientate evaluatees about how to pass the evaluation.

Lastly, the call was made for **greater coordination between agencies that evaluate research**. More specifically, the view is held that agencies should endeavour to use similar criteria and equivalents in evaluations.

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Final decalogue

A summary is given below of the ten main actions to be carried out:

1. **A mixed system for assessment** needs to be established. Assessment should be based mainly on evaluation using indirect mechanisms, backed up in cases where this is requested of an evaluation of a particularly important piece of work using direct mechanisms.
2. Assessment of the quality of research should be **without prejudice to the language** in which it is written nor the place that it originates or refers to.
3. **The role of the book, monograph and book chapter** as highly important instruments used to channel research in these disciplinary fields needs to be restored.
4. **Quality criteria need to be set for academically oriented publishers** in both the university and private sectors.
5. Databases need to comply with clear and objective quality criteria **in order for journals that are included to be assessed**.
6. A definition needs to be established for **what is understood by knowledge transfer**.
7. All sections of the information on **the procedure, the reviewer selection process, the rights of the evaluatee and the evaluation criteria need to be precise, objective and transparent**.
8. In the case of indirect evaluation, **the reviewers need to be from the same discipline** as the person being evaluated (evaluatee). In the case of direct evaluation, **reviewers need to have a profile that is as close as possible to the field of knowledge**.
9. **Improvements** need to be made to **the justification for assessment resolutions**.
10. **There needs to be greater coordination between the agencies** that assess and evaluate research.

Barcelona, 15 March 2010