

# Challenges of the evaluation of social sciences and humanities research (SSH)

## ENRESSH – European Network for Research Evaluation in the SSH

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### Preamble

ENRESSH gathers leading research evaluation scholars from 35 countries, with the aim to develop appropriate and transparent methods of evaluation for the SSH.

This document seeks to establish principles and approaches towards improving research evaluation for the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). It lists a number of challenges that are faced in evaluating SSH research. It is based on expert discussions within the COST Action 15137 (ENRESSH), on the [stakeholders' meeting organised in Prague in January 2017](#) and on previous reports and manifestos around research evaluation (Leiden manifesto, HERA report on SSH research evaluation, etc.).

### General considerations

We assert that, commensurate with its academic, societal and cultural value, SSH research deserves increased policy attention as well as an evaluation protocol capable of reflecting its potential and value.

The Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) are crucial in any society where knowledge and culture are valued. SSH research underpins democracy and deserves to be recognised for its own merits in teaching critical thought, as well as its contribution to the understanding of many modern issues such as economic crisis, migration or conflicts arising from religious, cultural and socio-economic differences.

The pre-condition for any evaluation exercise is to build trust and confidence between the evaluators and the evaluated. At present, scepticism towards evaluation is found among SSH scholars, due to procedures that are ill-adapted or even inappropriate to SSH research paradigms.

Many SSH research topics have strong significant societal impacts on the local level, and others need to use vernacular language. For the entire SSH research community, the development of relevant and meaningful benchmarks and indicators is possible, and essential to build confidence, trust and compliance with research evaluation.

Where mistrust is found among SSH scholars towards evaluation, it is often related to inappropriate or incomplete communication. We recommend **bottom-up** discussions providing a large voice for SSH scholars, as well as to relevant societal stakeholders, in order to **link evaluation to knowledge production** in the evaluated disciplines. We recommend that quality and relevance should **not be automatically related to a particular type of publication** (i.e. monographs or articles). Instead, all types of outputs in the SSH should be rewarded, according to their scholarly relevance and/or societal impact. This reflects the scholarly consensus that quality comes in many shapes and forms.



The evaluation process should be **transparent**. This means clearly stating the goals, criteria, quantitative thresholds, consequences and benchmarks for evaluation of both academic quality and societal relevance. A commitment to transparency also requires that outcomes are made publicly available, while respecting individual-level privacy.

Finally, more data about SSH research is needed. ENRESSH experts have observed that SSH evaluation is significantly impeded by the lack of robust and valid data. Although data is currently being collected (through project evaluation, programme evaluation, institution evaluation, etc.), it is neither harmonised nor complete at the European level.

### **Improving SSH research evaluation**

To address the above challenges, the following principles and recommendations must be considered:

- 1. SSH diversity** must be taken into account **in evaluation exercises**. SSH research does not follow a single paradigm and is interdisciplinary.
  - **Relate** evaluation procedures to the research practices in the respective SSH field.
  - Design and execute **multidimensional/mixed method** evaluation paradigms and procedures that admit that no single indicator can capture the value of both scholarly contributions and society-oriented work.
  - Gain **systematic evidence** about production, dissemination and impact in the SSH.
- 2. The quality of peer-review processes** for evaluating SSH research must be monitored, and new forms of peer-review that recognise the societal value of SSH research, as well as other important aspects, need to be developed.
  - Invest in extended forms of review, where different types of expertise are included.
  - Organise **training** of professionals in evaluation, involving any necessary knowledge users in the evaluation of social impacts.
  - Allow for meta-evaluation of assessments where SSH research is involved.
- 3. Develop databases reflecting all types of SSH research output**, interoperable at the European level and **useful for researchers** as means of dissemination and information retrieval.
  - Reflect upon the role of national and international **authoritative lists of publication channels**, and the definition of minimal standards for scholarly publications.
  - Identify the SSH fields where **(alt-)metrics** are relevant and appropriate evaluation tools, linked to the research practices in the field.
  - Where relevant, develop methods for attributing (alt)-metrics to **individual publications**, and not to the dissemination channel in which they are published.

### **Next steps**

Building new models to judge performance, quality and relevance of SSH research requires further cooperation at national, European and international levels.

As a network of experts in SSH research evaluation, ENRESSH is ideally placed to provide further on going expertise and advice to the relevant stakeholders about the implementation of the above recommendations.

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