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EVALUATING TO VALORISE: THE SOCIETAL VALUE OF SSH RESEARCH AND THE ENRESSH COST ACTION

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INTRODUCTION

In many areas of the SSH, evaluation has a bad press. It is often seen in antagonistic terms where policy makers impose ill-adapted procedures that distort SSH communication and dissemination traditions and which only serve in the handing out of funding resources, generally to the detriment of the SSH. At the same time, those SSH scholars who are against evaluation strongly believe in the value of their disciplines. They are also quite happy to evaluate their students and are firm believers in peer review. There is obviously a gap to be bridged, and the new COST action, ENRESSH, CA 15137, - the European Network for Research Evaluation in the Social Sciences and Humanities – sets out to do this. This paper will set out to show the link between valorisation and societal impact of the SSH on the one hand, and research evaluation on the other hand. It discusses how ENRESSH will seek to involve the different stakeholders having a say in evaluation principles and processes. In a second part, this paper will present the provisional lessons learned from our initial survey about who's who in SSH research evaluation in Europe, and about how this is done.

SETTING THE SCENE

It is beyond doubt that the SSH make an important contribution to academia and society. There are many reports about the contributions of SSH research, and a fine showcase can be found on the REF-data base of case studies (<http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/>). But it is not only these specific SSH related results that count, it is also important to realise that many of the technical advancement evolving from STEM fields research, will only be accepted by the society when they are embedded in the social context and the concerns that are debated there about the impact of these technical innovations. This is where knowledge from SSH fields is often of vital importance. Whether it is about fracking, HIV vaccination campaigns, the migration crisis or global warming, in all these issues SSH expertise is much wanted to raise awareness, change attitudes, and alter policies.

Despite all this, many academics and policy makers fail to recognise the value of SSH research for the contributions they make in addressing the major societal challenges we are facing. Nevertheless, this situation seems to be slowly changing for the better. The EU framework program Horizon 2020 for example aims at giving SSH research a more prominent role in their programmes and policies. To date, this embedding process

has had mitigated results (see European Commission, 2016) and, clearly, conditions need to be created for it to become more successful. The question is thus how we can monitor the valorisation of the SSH and, more importantly, how we can speed up this process. This is where the ENRESSH COST action comes in.

Enhancing the impact of SSH research – and of research in general - can only happen if three conditions are met simultaneously:

1. Academics' engagement with society's problems has to be made more explicit, both for the society but also for the scholars themselves;
2. Policy makers in academia have to become more aware of the value of SSH research for their own institutions, for other academic fields that engage with societal questions, and for society as a whole (notice for example that many universities owe their position in international rankings such as THE to a large extent to the SSH fields);
3. Evaluation policies at all levels have to become more comprehensive and inclusive for SSH as well as for all fields of the academic endeavour.

All three goals are equally important, but in this Action, the main focus is on the latter, evaluation and evaluation policy is at the centre of our activities. But we realise that the other two have to be part and parcel of the Action because without academics and policymakers realizing the vital importance of SSH research for the wellbeing and functioning of our democratic societies, no policy will likely succeed in changing things for the better.

THE ENRESSH COST ACTION

ENRESSH is a new dedicated COST action that sets out to tackle these three goals by bringing together stakeholders – institutional, policy and academic - from across Europe so as to propose new ways to look at research evaluation in the SSH. It aims to create a set of best practices that will not only lead to more constructive indicators, but actively valorise the research of the evaluators.

The main thrust of ENRESSH will be valorising SSH research. This calls for deepening our understanding of SSH research and their production and communication processes – both with regard to the scientific community and with societal partners. This means also studying the structural requirements and conditions necessary for the flowing of SSH knowledge and expertise towards other disciplines and society at large. Together, this will lay the foundation for an innovative approach to eva-

uation in which the contribution of the SSH to academia and society will be more adequately valued. With this, we will respond to a pressing need expressed by all parties involved in the exercise (i. e. evaluators, policy-makers as beneficiary of the evaluation, and last but not least scholars themselves).

COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION IN A STAKEHOLDER CONTEXT

Clearly, one of the keys for a successful response is a productive cooperation between the various stakeholders, and this does not happen naturally. Firstly, because we are dealing with a variegated context in which many different stakeholders operate, each with their own expertise and interests; they are often not used to collaborate and as a rule have little spare time for talking to each other. Secondly, the SSH are known to be scientific fields with low degrees of functional and scientific dependence (Whitley, 1984), an affirmation more or less valid but with variations from one discipline to another and from one country to another. In the Netherlands, for example, many disciplines collaborate through national or at least supra-institutional plans (called discipline plans or research agendas), but in other countries this is not the case. Furthermore, as revealed by a recent analysis of the publication habits of scholars in the humanities, conducted on a sample of outputs by more than 300 Italian scholars over a ten-year period (Galleron and Basso, forthcoming), very different patterns of communication and dissemination exist, even between kin disciplines. Beyond the general picture one can get when looking at the whole, this discloses, unsurprisingly, the importance of books in many SSH fields. And the evaluation of book publications is under-developed compared to the evaluation of articles in scientific journals.

The variety and fragmentation of SSH fields may be a hindrance to coordination and collaboration, but at the same time it is important to realise that the diversity of this sector of knowledge is also its wealth and strength, in particular in relation to a society that is characterised by an ever accelerating pace. The involvement of scholars and stakeholders in the design of new evaluation protocols is therefore both necessary and complicated, and the challenge is then to come up with frameworks that do justice to both the disciplinary variation and the policy demands for frameworks that allow to some form of comparison necessary for policy and funding decisions.

EUROPEAN DIFFERENCES

It is important to realise that evaluation of and policy-making in the SSH are organised very differently from one European country to another, and even from one discipline to another. Furthermore, countries face different challenges in academia; thus, evaluations serve diverse needs. In some countries, SSH benefit from “special tracks” and specific protocols; in others, they are treated on the same basis as the “hard” sciences – which in some cases translates by “not treated” at all. Dedicated evaluation agencies intervene in certain cases, while ad hoc panels are put together in others. From a more qualitative perspective, expectations are clearly not the same towards the SSH, with some countries more interested in their societal relevance and impact, while others looking

at the field from the point of view of its academic excellence, sometimes very narrowly defined as “capacity to publish in high impact factor journals”.

ENRESSH sets out to tackle the problems related to finding innovative evaluation approaches that are able to cope with both types of diversity: that of the scientific variation in SSH research and of the multiplicity of societal demand and context. Its main aims are:

1. To improve evaluation procedures in order to take into account the diversity and the wealth of SSH research;
2. To make a robust case for the ways in which the SSH add value to the society;
3. To help SSH scholars better appropriate their research agenda and overcome fragmentation, while still leaving place for individual and specialized research typical for these disciplines.
4. To open up SSH research for interaction with societal stakeholders.

To achieve these results, ENRESSH brings together researchers from 29 European and cooperating states, whose perspectives on tools and methods can help tackling the complex problems of SSH evaluation. These researchers come from many different fields: sociologists and historians of science, bibliometricians, specialists in political sciences, as well as philosophers, cultural studies specialists, librarians and linguists. Together they will be able to oversee the developments in all these countries and in most SSH fields with regard to evaluation in the context of societal demand.

THE ACTION IS ORGANISED IN FOUR WORKING GROUPS:

1. WG 1. Conceptual frameworks for SSH research evaluation:

The objective of this working group is to further develop our understanding of the SSH knowledge production processes and strategies, as a basis for developing evaluation procedures that adequately reflect the research practices, goals and aims of the SSH scholars. The working group will tackle the dialectic issues of the potentials and drawbacks of (a) metric approaches and peer review; (b) international exchange and cooperation and the local rootedness of SSH; and (c) the need for interdisciplinary exchange and disciplinary expertise.

2. WG 2. Societal impact and relevance of the SSH research:

The objective of this working group is to analyse the engagement of SSH researchers with societal challenges, the ways in which interaction takes pace in non-academic partnerships and environments of SSH research, their diversity and their experiences with collaboration.

3. WG 3. Databases and uses of data for understanding SSH research:

The main objective of this working group is to reflect upon the standardization and the interoperability of current research information systems dedicated to the SSH research outcomes.

4. WG4. Dissemination:

The objective of this working group is on the one hand to ensure a maximum visibility of the Action through outreach activities among SSH researchers and specialists in research evaluation and among political, societal or economic stakeholders, and on the other hand this workgroup

is focussing on processes of engagement and communication between researchers and stakeholders.

A PAN-EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

ENRESSH takes a pan-European perspective. Analysing evaluation practices in the SSH in the European countries, we will describe and systematise the characteristics of various evaluation procedures in use and the ways policy makers and stakeholders are involved in designing and implementing these evaluations. We will synthesize the current strands of research on SSH evaluation, as well as the different philosophies (or doctrines) informing the exercise in the countries participating in the network.

A survey among the Management Committee members of the Action showed that there is a wealth of different evaluation procedures in Europe. The survey was conducted in the weeks before the kick-off meeting of the Action, i.e. in March 2016, and 45 representatives from 23 countries participated in the survey, i.e. one to five respondents per country. The results show that in a majority of the countries there is a national evaluation procedure in place. In slightly less countries, there is a national database of (SSH) publications at hand. In slightly more than half of the countries, SSH research is evaluated by at least some SSH-specific measures. However, the results also showed that existing typologies of evaluation procedures (Coryn et al., 2007; Hicks, 2010; 2012; Martin & Geuna, 2001; 2003; von Tunzelmann & Mbula, 1999) do not suffice to capture the diverse landscape of European research evaluation. First, representatives of the same country very often disagreed on many questions describing the evaluation system. Second, the “other” option was used quite often for many questions. A further interesting finding is the high number of respondents stating that in their country, there is officially no link between evaluations and funding but, in practice, evaluation results are used for funding decisions anyway.

We conclude from these preliminary results that a) definitions have to be made explicit (e.g. what exactly is performance based funding), b) typologies have to be expanded to be able to capture the diverse landscape of European evaluation procedures, c) awareness of the evaluation procedures in place at different levels has to be raised, and d) adequate evaluation procedures for the SSH have to be identified, optimised and promoted.

CONCLUSION

The problems facing the SSH and evaluation are not new. What is new is that they are finally being tackled across Europe in a concerted endeavour. ENRESSH brings together a community that has been studying evaluation phenomena for years, and offers the opportunity for others to join in the debate. ENRESSH has four years to carry forward its mission, and the foundations are already strong.

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