
Measuring Research Performance in the Humanities

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MEASURING RESEARCH PERFORMANCE IN THE HUMANITIES

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The article starts from the specific difficulties of applying quantitative analysis to the humanities and the general resistance to such analysis in the Federal Republic of Germany. It gives a survey of the attempts to apply bibliometric methods in English Studies, the only subject investigated so far. The highly individual nature of research in the humanities is stressed and differences in subfields are illustrated. There is little influence of departmental, size or age on the publication behaviour of individuals. More studies of citation behaviour are needed for a reliable evaluation of the impact of research in the humanities.

Research in the humanities

Considering the importance ascribed to research in the German university tradition it comes as a surprise that almost nothing has been published on the problem of what constitutes research in the humanities or what is or should be considered as such by the community of scholars in what was until around 1970 the Philosophische Fakultät. Before the expansion of the university system, professors apparently somehow “knew” what was happening in their particular subject. Even in “big” subjects like History or German Studies there were less than a hundred professors and few junior staff. Subjects were “self-contained”, especially as there was little international comparison or competition. There is no “scientific” progress in the humanities. The humanities depend for their kind of progress much more on informal agreement between leading scholars or on majority opinion, which is not easily defined. Little is known about the internal mechanisms of German humanities.1-2

Even a superficial look at some of the subjects shows how quickly they change under the influence of political upheavals or a change of fashion (most colleagues would prefer to speak about a change of paradigms, misusing Kuhn’s3 terminology in order to give their opinion a more scientific flavour), or simply because – as in the case of Literary Studies – they have run out of new material. A good example is the
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low esteem of editing. Well-edited texts, nowadays, are taken for granted. Not infrequently, they are not even mentioned in footnotes – and the editor will not get his entry in the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*. The expansion of the humanities – English Studies, for instance, had 34 professors in 1960 and 360 in 1985-6 – has entailed an enormous increase of output. The expansion was due to an increased demand for student places: to a large extent research has been a by-product of teaching. Certain requirements of the career structure – dissertation and *Habilitationsschrift* – account for a large proportion of the monographs published in the humanities and should not be mistaken as a "measure" of the productivity of a particular subject. The chances of reaching a tenured post without two monographs have varied, however, considerably between 1960 and 1988. The teaching staff of the humanities consists, therefore, of several "layers" and these must be taken into account in measuring the output of a particular subject. A fair account of research in the humanities must consider the specific nature of this kind of research, the influence of the particular subject and the historical forces at work.

Measuring research in the humanities

The majority of professors in the humanities are of the opinion that research cannot be "measured" because a problem of quality cannot be tackled with quantitative methods. Most colleagues refuse to admit that the proliferation of posts, periodicals and publications, the advertising of professorial posts (enforced since about 1975 by the University Law) and the cost of the modern university system demand a new kind of accountability and comparative assessment which will have to use quantitative measures, even if it is not based solely on such indicators. In the almost complete absence of tested indicators for measuring research output in the humanities there exists a danger that the humanities will be subjected to a Procrustean kind of evaluation.

Data Base

So far very few data are available for a comparative analysis of research output or research profiles of the individual subjects. More or less complete data are available for English Studies for the period 1965 ff. The official data gathered on the basis of the University Statistics Law are being analyzed by F. Neidhardt at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (unpublished); their value seems to
be rather limited for an in-depth study. Research in German and English Studies (among others) is at present under scrutiny by P. Weingart at the University of Bielefeld; his bibliometric study of the humanities commissioned by the Bundesministerium für Forschung und Technologie will probably become available in 1990.

Documentation in Folklore Studies allows for a general overview and qualitative statement; it is too selective for a quantitative analysis. Bibliographical studies in History have concentrated on the pre-war period. In a few years' time they will provide a good basis for a longitudinal comparison with English Studies from 1850 to the present. In the absence of comparative data the following remarks must be based on those for English Studies.9

Output

It is true that publishing should not be identified with research; it is equally true that research must be published in order to be called research. The *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* tries to solve the problem by defining research in a particular field by analyzing a number of periodicals considered to be representative of the subject in question. A second and probably more adequate approach is to use the complete bibliographies of individuals as a basis of the analysis. These can be sorted by type of publication. Anglicists have been reticent about weighting different types; the values suggested in 197810 have not been fundamentally challenged. Table 1 should be read together with Table 2, which contains the answers of anglicists to the question "How would you rate the following types of publication as an indicator of research activity?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of publication</th>
<th>Weighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monograph</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monograph, co-authored</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article, co-authored</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short article</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended review</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorship of a book</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-editorship</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The quantitative analysis of the bibliographies of about 400 anglicists listed in the Anglistenspiegel\textsuperscript{11} of 1976 showed an almost clear-cut division between professorial and other staff in publication behaviour. Daniel \& Fisch\textsuperscript{12} show that the publication pattern of professors corresponds pretty well to Loika's Law.\textsuperscript{13} A ranking by weighted publications showed that ranking groups for senior professors made on the basis of weighted publications coincided with those established by merely counting the publications. There are a few exceptions, however, where quantitative data lead astray: major projects (e.g. a multi-volume concordance) are not adequately represented in a ranking list, whereas the reviewer and contributor of short articles gets too high a place on the list. A longitudinal study of 1989 showed that it is better to use weighted publication lists and that it is useful to distinguish the authors by seniority and age (e.g. time of Dr. phil., of Habilitation and first post as professor). The longitudinal study showed a surprising increase of the publication rate after 1975 even for the senior professors for whom the threat of "publish or perish" no longer exists. The available data could probably be used for a study of "creativity and age" in the humanities. The available evidence seems to warrant the conclusion that scholars who have published regularly for about fifteen years will continue to do so. Publication behaviour was controlled for size of department in our 1989 study, but no correlation was found: some professors published much (and good) work under a heavy teaching load; some others have not published a single line in departments with a few students only.

A grouping of the anglicists by type of post (e.g. full professors, associate professors and other tenured staff) showed that for a total of 260 cases there was a decline of the rate of publication per year from 2.64 for full to 1.16 for associate professors
and 0.7 for other tenured staff. The age at Dr. phil., on the other hand, increased from an average of 29.20 for full professors to 30.50 for associate professors and 31.20 for the rest.\textsuperscript{14} There is little influence of size or structure of departments on the research performance: a detailed analysis of the publications of a few departments of different size and age for the period of 1971 to 1985 showed again the highly individualistic nature of research in the humanities. There is little team work and few publications are co-authored. This may be due to the insignificant role played by project-work. Whether the establishment of special collaborative programmes (Sonderforschungsbereiche) by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft will lead to more cooperation within departments remains to be seen. There is one aspect of research performance, however, where department size and age play a considerable role, namely dissertations. "New" universities with "young" professors, \textit{i.e.} those who have their first chair, cannot compete with the older universities and the senior professors in the "production" of doctorates. For a fair evaluation of graduate programmes at least a ten-year-period must be used for comparison. The drop-out rate is very high for aspiring graduates and it soars if the supervising professor (Doktorvater) accepts the offer of a chair at another university.\textsuperscript{15-16}

There are very few refereed journals in the humanities in the Federal Republic of Germany. Even though there seems to be some sort of agreement on the leading (or most useful?) journals, actual publication behaviour seems to be little related to it. One aspect of the publication pattern needs more detailed investigation: the journal editor. "Nearness" to the editor, \textit{e.g.} as assistant or former colleague, seems to have a considerable influence on the relative chance of having an article accepted for publication or being asked to review a book. Little is known, however, about review policy. One of the most interesting aspects of the history and the present state of research in any one of the humanities is the distribution of the research over the whole "field" of a subject. A mapping of the output - clusters as well as empty spaces - presupposes a definition of the whole discipline and its subfields. Modern tendencies, \textit{e.g.} interdisciplinary methods, have made it more difficult to draw clear-cut boundaries. Until about 1950 it was quite easy to study research output by centuries, as the humanities understood their work as fundamentally historical.\textsuperscript{17} The "good old days" when a subject was represented by one full professor only have gone. In most of the large disciplines, the Massenfächer, we now have special professorships for different subfields. In English Studies these would be - as a rule - English Literature, Linguistics, American Studies, Didactics (teaching of English). In addition one can find, amongst others, Philology, Medieval Studies, Applied Linguistics. A quantitative analysis of these fields showed considerable
differences in the number of publications, in their length and, to some extent, their type. Colleagues in the field of Literature produce articles with an average length of fifteen pages – i.e. lectures of 45 minutes; people in Linguistics produce articles of a widely varying number of pages, old-style philologists produce less than the average anglistic, and the professors of Didactics publish more and apparently more easily. As the “objective” sorting principles have vanished since about 1960 because there is no longer a unified view of subjects among the practitioners of the respective crafts and because of actual changes in their behaviour, the problem of delimiting subjects which are to be the basis and object of bibliometric or other scientometric studies has gained a new dimension. It is dangerous to leave the solution simply to the bibliographer. It is perhaps more fruitful to ask the community of scholars to define themselves and have themselves sorted into the pigeon-holes they want to be found in. Research in the humanities can be defined as an ordered discourse. It is, therefore, necessary that people should know the address of the pigeon-hole in which possible partners of the scholarly discourse can be found. An attempt was made recently to produce such a self-defined register of discipline and special research subjects for the untenured staff of English Studies. There is, of course, the odd individual with a very idiosyncratic way of describing his research. Madmen cannot be eliminated from the humanities; as a rule they are simply mad and should be made visible as such. The objective bibliographer will tend to make them more normal than they are.

Impact

In the sciences it is fairly easy to measure the importance (quality?) of research by comparing output with impact on later research through citation analysis. Little is known about the details of the impact of the output in the humanities. There is, no doubt, the international community of scholars whose discourse can fruitfully be studied with the help of the Citation Index. A number of disciplines or subfields within disciplines do not address an international audience, however. Regional studies, local history and teacher training have a limited range as far as output and impact are concerned, but it would be ridiculous to rate such subjects lower than the sciences. And the book addressed to the good old common reader is probably more valuable for society than a specialised article – in spite of its many citations. It may even be the case that the common reader does not get the books he deserves because a mistaken idea of “impact” makes the junior staff publish articles instead of readable books. (The statistics of the publications in English Studies point in this
direction). The discourse of the humanities is not or should not be restricted to the tenured members of university departments and their junior staff hoping to gain tenure. The impact of German anglicists according to the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* was studied by A. Conze. Not surprisingly the anglicists that come out on top of the list are among those whose output is above average. The professors of Didactics are in the bottom range. Consolidated figures for whole departments should not be used as an impact measure because high totals are frequently due to individuals and not to a combined departmental effort. The observations on the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* published so far show that what we need is a more comprehensive study of the overall citation behaviour in the humanities. More must be found out about this behaviour in general and the patterns of individual fields. A few preliminary remarks must suffice: As monographs are considered to be the most important type of publication we need more information on their impact on later monographs and, if possible, on the general public. Dissertations and *Habilitationsschriften* are probably a class by themselves because their quotations seem to reflect the network of possible referees and later colleagues as much as that of the international community of scholars. Influential professors disappear from the footnotes when they retire, just as they are no longer sent offprints. It would also be instructive to do a negative study: bibliographies and dictionaries are frequently taken for granted without acknowledgement; catalogues are often quoted only when the author finds an item "not listed in XI". Finally, the question of impact must be treated as a long-term problem, even more so than the measuring of the output.

**Prospect**

The Federal Republic of Germany is a developing country as far as the measurement of research performance is concerned, and the majority of our colleagues – at least in the humanities – are happy and lucky that this is so. They prefer not to view their craft as part of some complicated social process and they will be delighted to read that Article 5 (3) of the constitution would seem to endorse an individualist theory of research. Even if it does, the question of accountability in our society must be given a satisfactory answer.

The answer, I believe, will be more satisfactory if more members of the humanities tribe in the universities join the debate on how to measure or not to measure research. A refusal to collect and interpret data is no way out. Others, less qualified to do so, will collect them and will probably apply the wrong sort of theory to the practice of research in the humanities.
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There is another option for the government: a ruthless cutting back of the humanities to their former size and cost. If such a reduction is not to be purely haphazard – and there are signs that it is and will be – it ought to be based on some kind of measurement. In the humanities we cannot expect a natural survival of the fittest.

Notes and references


2. For English Studies see TH. FINKENSTAEDT, Kleine Geschichte der Anglistik in Deutschland. Eine Einführung, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1983.


4. English Studies is now the usual name; Anglistics is frequently used for English Studies on the Continent. The subject has its roots in nineteenth century philology. Its subfields are now Linguistics and Literary Studies; in many universities the latter are subdivided into English, American, Canadian etc. (literary) Studies.


6. TH. FINKENSTAEDT (Ed.), Informationen, Englische Philologie, University of Augsburg, No. 40.

7. This statement is based on a survey among anglistics conducted in 1987 (unpublished) as well as numerous discussions with colleagues from various subjects.


14. For details see TH. FINKENSTAEDT, M. FRIES. Op. cit., note 10; a rough measure of “bibliographic centimeters per year” was used.


22. On the other hand I find my Habilitationsschrift quoted by people who cannot read German.