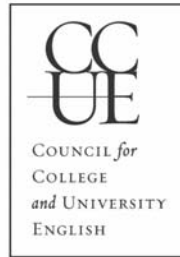


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27th April 2006

Re Building a European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH)

The CCUE Executive Committee has consulted widely across the subject community and has, even within the lamentably short time allowed by the AHRC timetable, identified several areas of serious concern regarding the scope, purpose, and accuracy of this exercise. So that you may gauge the depth and the extent of the concern we have urged all those who have responded to our attempt to consult the subject community on behalf of AHRC to express their anxieties directly to you. We have outlined the principal concerns in more detail below, but, given the potential long-term significance of what is being undertaken here, we would argue strongly at this stage for a pause for further consideration, with a view to establishing the terms of reference of a more considered and transparent exercise than that currently underway.

The subject community in Britain has identified numerous errors and omissions in the lists and rankings made in the draft Index: indeed we have even received submissions from colleagues working in other European national associations of English Studies. Some journals appear twice or even three times under slightly different titles, in many cases with different rankings (*The Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, for instance, are listed three times, and are ranked in the A category twice and the C category once). Many journals of international standing do not appear at all, while others are rated as less significant than European journals of English Studies with little or no significance outside their country of origin. Such anomalies need to be ironed out if any kind of positive consensus is to be reached about the usefulness of this document. We have asked members of the community who have identified omissions to write directly to you with a list of the relevant journal titles. We have not suggested ratings for these journals, nor have we attempted to correct the numerous errors and inconsistencies that exist in the current ratings, as neither the CCUE executive, the Higher Education Committee of the English Association, nor those Heads of Department who were fortuitously able to respond to our calls for advice over the Easter vacation have the necessary breadth of expertise to judge accurately a list which runs from general literary and language journals down to highly specific titles relating to a single author, theme, or chronological period. The only way that an accurate list could be provided that might carry the confidence of the UK subject community is for a wide-ranging panel of peer

reviewers in English Studies to be convened, with the co-operation of CCUE and the English Association, to reconsider the list from first principles. Such a body of course exists, in the form of the RAE 2008 English sub-panel which was constituted to offer peer review of research over as wide a spectrum of the subject as possible. An alternative body competent to conduct this review would be the membership of the AHRC Peer Review College. If the ERIH process in subjects such as Religious Studies and Theology is already at a far less advanced stage than that in Literature it would surely be better to expand the timetable to accommodate a consultation that would command a degree of credibility than to forge ahead with a list whose errors, omissions and incomprehensible ratings cannot be rectified by the hasty testing of the waters currently in progress. We are also led to believe that our colleagues in Linguistics are making a similar request for extending this stage of the exercise so as to achieve more credible results.

As it stands the Index is both too broadly conceived and too partially executed to be an accurate measure of research activity. It includes not only English Studies journals published in English and other languages but also Modern Languages journals published in English and other languages. Given the numerical dominance of English as a field of study across the world, and the dominance of Anglophone journals within that field, it is inevitable that any objectively conceived Index will be dominated by Anglophone English Studies journals to the detriment of all the rest. The playing field is thus not a level one. We would recommend the disaggregation of English from the other language fields if the latter are not to suffer (especially if some form of artificial rationing of the highest grades of journal is still to be contemplated).

More seriously, however, even within the field of English studies the Index does not compare like with like, and if it is allowed to stand will seriously disadvantage certain areas of research activity important to the health and future growth of the discipline. The fields of Creative Writing and Pedagogical Research in English, for example, each vital emerging elements of the UK intellectual economy, do not publish research in journals in the same way as more conventional literary or linguistic research, and so are likely to fare poorly in the current exercise. In this respect, however, these fields are only extreme cases of the discipline as a whole, as journal publication is only a relatively minor element in the publication profile in English. Monographs, collections of essays, and electronic sources must all be included in any Index that seeks accurately to measure the scope and quality of research in English Studies.

It is also important to note that the Index as it is currently configured contains a number of different *kinds* of journal, whose significance is not uniform across the discipline. Titles such as the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books*, or *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, are high-profile publications, with a wide international readership, but they are not 'research journals' in the sense of publishing primary research findings (except in the special case of the contemporary poetry they publish – one of the important ways in which Creative Writing publication patterns are different). There are also non-Anglophone journals which provide a vital conduit for work in English Studies in a particular country or language community, but which are not much read outside that community (a fact that may have little or nothing to do with the quality of research published within them). Then there are highly specialized Anglophone journals with high academic standards and wide international readerships within specialists in their particular fields (such as journals devoted to a single author, literary genre, or period). Finally there are generalist journals with a wide remit and a wide international readership, which may publish work in any particular specialist field only intermittently, purely because of the volume and range of material submitted to it. World-

class research in English may be published in each of these kinds of journals, and there is no guarantee that all articles published in an 'A' rated journal will necessarily be superior to some appearing in a journal rated 'B', hence the decision of successive RAE English sub-panels to judge the work submitted on its own intrinsic merits rather than on its place of publication. Given that the current exercise flies in the face of this established pattern of assessment practice, a practice based upon widespread peer review and consultation, it is doubly important to get the Index right, if it is not to be challenged by the subject community (and conceivably by publishing houses anxious to protect the standing of the journals they publish, in which they have considerable financial as well as intellectual investment)

Our more detailed comments are as follows:

1. *Panel Composition:* the explanatory notes offering guidance on the ERIH process fail to make transparent the process by which these unwieldy subject groupings were arrived at, or the criteria by which the panel members were selected. Given the extraordinary breadth of the Literature panel's remit the panel would seem too small to be able to make competent judgements over such a range. In addition, given the critical mass of practitioners of English Studies in UK universities it is also very surprising to see how few there were on the ESF subject panel. It was also curious that the two major English subject associations were not consulted when the panels were appointed.
2. *Literature Scope notes:* at the Bristol meeting on 31st March it emerged that the 'scope notes' had been determined, not by a clear definition of disciplines and current practice, but by what the particular panels felt they were competent to judge. From the point of view of English Studies it is impossible to arrive at meaningful comparison of journals which deal with the literatures of a variety of European languages: this, in turn, means that it will not be possible to derive meaningful statistics from the exercise.
3. *The Consultative process:* Adequate consultation with learned societies and subject organizations is almost impossible given the time constraints. In our own case, the AUT strike in the UK on 7th March inevitably foreshortened the time available for contacting CCUE's membership. The period of less than a month between the Bristol meeting of 31st March and the return date of 28th April is curtailed yet further by a period of university closure over the Easter period. This is particularly worrying since, consulting only national member organizations and learned societies with elected memberships, rather than period or topic-based societies, is unlikely to tap the full range of necessary expertise. In any event insufficient space has been left in the process to debate the categorization of the journals.
4. *Categorization:* We were told that it is likely that OST will only take account of the figures for the 'A' rated category, which would be a failure to recognise the contribution made by journals in the B and C categories. Moreover, the allocation of a pre-determined 5-20% limit for 'A' ratings is at odds with any sense that this is an academic quality-based ranking. English Studies encompass an almost uniquely broad field of study, stretching from Creative Writing and Language study (itself spread from Old Norse to modern socio-linguistics) through codicology, palaeography, literary history (again ranging from old English to contemporary fiction), to literary theory, media studies, and pedagogical research. Within so diverse a disciplinary field

the idea of a single hierarchy of journals makes no sense. Specialists in many of the discipline's constituent fields (only some of which have been cited above) are likely to publish in specialist journals rather than in broad-coverage general periodicals such as *English* or *The Review of English Studies*. Or again, some of the best research is more likely to be submitted to single-author journals (such as those devoted to Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth or Dickens), which in turn attract critically well-informed readers, than to find a home in a wider, period-based journal. Hence the idea of an elite category of only 5-20% of journals is unlikely to carry the confidence of the subject as a whole.

Like other exercises which claim that their sole function is to record data, this one will undoubtedly start to influence the future of the journals and the nature of research carried out in the Humanities. At the simplest level log-jams, of even greater proportions than currently exist, will develop in the A ranked journals, so delaying the dissemination of ground-breaking work. There has been no history in the English subject community of 'ranked' journal publication and the RAE criteria (over which extensive consultation was carried out) explicitly reject any such formulaic hierarchies. Ground-breaking work has frequently appeared in new or low-profile journals, while some long-established journals have developed a tradition of publishing articles of merit within only a narrowly defined conspectus. British academics' submissions to journals are influenced by a variety of criteria, many of which do not relate to any perceived ranking: these include the time from submission to publication (which can vary from 6 months to over two years), word-limits (some journals take only 5,000 word submissions, others go to 10,000); availability of illustrations; the breadth of the journal's remit, or, conversely, its specialist interests and readership. There are no simple comparators to *Mind*, or *Nature* in the field of English Studies. Either the 'rationing' of the highest category of journal to 5-20% must be waived in the case of English, or the exercise will not yield accurate data on research quality.

5. *Characterisation of categories*: Currently different journal production cultures co-exist in Europe: for instance, transparent peer review and a visible method of quality control are not always the norm. 'Peer review' in the context of journal publication bears widely differing interpretations, from independent assessment of unnamed submissions by two or more leading authorities in the field, to a quick glance by one or two members of an editorial board which may not have exercised primarily academic criteria in its recruitment. For those outside the editorial board, who could be argued to have a vested interest in achieving an 'A ranking, it is impossible to know whether a journal's advisory board can be deemed 'active'.
6. *English Literature a special case*: Language: whilst ESSE offers a lively example of the ubiquity of English Studies it also needs to be recognized that in many areas of our discipline, Anglophone contributors to journals tend to favour placing their work in journals produced in Anglophone countries (in practice the UK and USA). Many journals published in Continental Europe are principally outlets for local or regional specialists. Application of the 5-20% rule, operating in a context where the UK's recommendations enjoy equal status with that of every other European participant, and where the recommendations of the UK's English subject community will sit alongside those of UK academics working in the literatures of other languages, will therefore tend to depress our ratings. Cultural difference: in a number of European countries governments are moving to influence undergraduate programmes to the detriment of the study of English

literature and in favour of the vocational teaching of language. This will mean that UK academics are likely to take a different view of the journals that do and should count when used as 'a proxy indicator' by our government.

Finally, despite the assurances given by AHRC that these rankings would be used for the sole purpose of estimating the UK's contribution to research in the Humanities, there is understandable anxiety that the information so obtained has the potential for being used in ways that could be broken down to an institutional or even an individual level. **We would therefore urge that these statistics should not be used :**

- i) for other purposes than measuring the UK's contribution as a whole to European research in the Humanities,
- ii) in any way that runs counter to the spirit of the criteria prepared by the English sub-panel for RAE 2008.
- iii) as 'proxy indicators' for the research output in the Humanities until such time as satisfactory means have been established for evaluating the monographs, essays and chapters in edited books, that form a substantial portion of the research output in English.
- iv) For any retrospective evaluation of English research output which would have assumed very different individual and departmental profiles had ranked journals and the status of publisher been used as assessment criteria.

CCUE's officers and member departments have devoted considerable time and detailed attention to this consultative exercise and trust that the AHRC will pay serious consideration to the concerns outlined above.

Yours sincerely

Elisabeth Jay

Copied: Professor Philip Esler, Chief Executive
Professor Tony McEnery, Director of Research