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Quality and Quality Control in the Humanities.
Funding Perspectives

The humanities have difficulties with the discourse about quality. And, insofar as they do not dissociate themselves from it entirely, those who speak for the humanities insist on having a special role where quality assessment and the criteria, indicators, and procedures for it are concerned. However, an increasing number of voices are also emphatically reasserting that robust appraisals of quality are possible even in the humanities and calling urgently on the community to take an active part in the development and application of corresponding standards and procedures. Against this background, the present article considers the problems and possibilities of checking and assessing quality as they present themselves from the point of view of research funding in the humanities in a German-language context. In the process, particular attention is given to literary studies, where the search for generally acceptable quality standards is particularly difficult due to deep-seated controversies about its aims, objects, methods, and audiences.

For checking quality in the context of research funding, the article proposes, peer review remains the procedure of choice. It does have weaknesses, though, and in view of these it is frequently embedded in communication processes in which the ›peers‹ have to set their opinions against one another and argue the case for them. It turns out that, in the process, even when the starting positions are widely separated, the dialogue between the assessors remarkably often leads to a consensus about the decision – in the humanities too. This in turn not only indicates that, even in these fields, there clearly *are* standards about which a consensus can be reached; it also underlines the significance of discussion, which holds out the possibility of agreement even where not only the aim, theme, methods, and audience of a project but also the criteria of assessment and their relative importance appear to be contentious.

The article then looks at some special features of research in the humanities that should also be considered in the context of assessment processes: the general lack of shared ›research frontiers‹, the curious way in which research themes and lines of enquiry become associated with individuals, the tendency to stress differences of opinion regarding details rather than agreement regarding fundamentals when communicating about projects and publications. Against this background, the various levels of evaluation, the controversial arguments that result from them, and the competences on which a justified appraisal of quality depends are considered. If it is increasingly expected of the humanities that they pass on their findings and insights not only within the academy but also to a wider audience, this too adds to

the complexity of the assessors' task, for in that case communicative achievement must enter into the assessment alongside scholarly accomplishment. The question remains, though: how and in what ratio? It is clear that considerable effort is needed to come to a consensus under these conditions, and that such agreement can be reached only in a dialogue guided by the maxims of willingness to recognize the better argument and readiness to reach a settlement. Seen in this way, assessment in the humanities is indeed to a large degree a ›matter of interpretation and negotiation‹ (Manfred Nießen) in which, fundamentally, everything is up for discussion: the evaluation of a proposal on the various levels (suitability of the primary figures involved, expected results and consequences, relationship between effort and outcomes, chances of success, status in competition with competing projects), the relative weighting of the levels of assessment themselves, the plausibility and weight of the arguments put forward, and not least the competence of those involved in the assessment process in forming a judgement. Thus, ›communicative reason‹ is needed if such ›forming judgements in a social context‹ (Nießen) is to lead to results that have a clear argument, are well justified, and can be presented with unanimity. It is not least experiences from funding allocation that show that this is, even in the humanities, exactly what happens again and again.

What is true of the humanities in general is also true of literary studies in particular: when communicating its results and insights, it stands out as being expected to consider those who, as readers, share its object of study – literature – with it, who want to be addressed, instructed, entertained, stimulated, inspired by it. Comprehensibility therefore takes on particular importance as a criterion for evaluating work in literary studies. This presents an additional challenge for the debate about quality in literary studies: it is a matter not simply of developing a sufficiently complex concept of quality and bringing it to bear on research practice, but also of fundamentally reconsidering what professionalism means in this subject – and how it can be cultivated in teaching and learning. To this extent, the debate about quality leads to the basic question of what precisely it is that makes literary studies in a German-language context a scholarly discipline (*Wissenschaft*). To this, too, it will be possible to find a convincing answer only in a discussion characterized by openness and a fundamental readiness to reach a consensus, in a communicative process of self-analysis whose results will depend for their quality above all on whether the discussion is pursued with the professionalism required.

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