

ARTICLE

“Rigid criteria should not be established”? A history of external peer review in European humanities funding

Marie-Gabrielle Verbergt¹

University of Ghent

Abstract

This article asks when and why external peer review was introduced in the European Science Foundation’s Standing Committee for the Humanities. Based on archival research covering the period 1975–2005, this article finds that 1997 was a key date for the introduction of external peer review in this committee. Up to that year, a lack of selection criteria in combination with highly flexible procedures made it possible for a small elite to allocate funding based on personal convictions and ties. It also finds that external peer review procedures were introduced for three distinct reasons. First, on the level of ideas, external review procedures were linked to accountability, fairness, and transparency. Second, external reviewers could assist the committee members with the logistical challenge of reviewing a growing number of applications. Third, within a changing European funding landscape, optimizing external peer review procedures and expertise was economically opportune for the European Science Foundation. Within historical studies on research evaluation, this economic dimension of the history of peer review has so far been overlooked.

Keywords

European Science Foundation; humanities; research funding; history of peer review

INTRODUCTION

Few scholars nowadays question the importance of grant funding in the academic ecosystem. Like prizes and citations, grants have been part of academic’s “cycles of credibility” throughout the entire 20th century (Latour and Woolgar 1979). Yet the importance and practice of obtaining competitive funding has, over the past half century, significantly changed (Bloch et al. 2014; Hicks 2012). More than ever before, academics are investing time (and money) into funding applications, while grant agencies have become increasingly focused on fair and efficient evaluation practices. This has

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resulted in a flourishing international “grant industry”, with manuals, reviewing, and consultancy services reaching all corners of the academy (for example Lock 2015).

How did this evolution come about? When were grant-giving practices professionalized, and which factors guided this evolution? This article addresses the history of grant peer review by interrogating how evaluation practices in European humanities funding changed between 1975 and 2005. This thirty-year period is characterized by the internationalization and standardization of science and higher education (Altbach and Knight 2011; Odin and Mancias 2004), the rise of the “knowledge society” policy discourse (Olssen and Peters 2005; Kenway et al. 2006; Seddon 2009), and the institutionalization of external peer review as a central evaluation practice in science (Baldwin 2019; Forsberg et al. 2022; Hansen 2022). This was the timeframe in which ideas – that we now take for granted – about “good governance” in scientific management were still in full development (Stampfer et al. 2010) and during which notions like “conflict of interest” were introduced at different paces across scientific fields (Hauray 2021).

To illustrate how these changes occurred in humanities funding on an international level, this article empirically concentrates on the European Science Foundation’s Standing Committee for the Humanities. The ESF was established in 1974 as an intergovernmental non-profit organization made up of various member organizations: mostly national funding agencies and academies. Its principal objectives were to (i) advance cooperation in basic research, (ii) promote the mobility of research workers, (iii) assist the free flow of information and ideas, and (iv) facilitate the harmonization of the basic research activities supported by member organizations (ESF-311). These goals very much echoed the European Communities’ overarching political ambition to achieve European integration. But while the EC had been somewhat involved in the constitution of the ESF, it had at that time very limited competences in the domain of research policy (Unger 2020; Guzzetti 2000). Therefore, before the European Research Council was established in 2007 (König 2017), the ESF’s Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH) had, for three decades, been the main international humanities research funding panel at the “European” level.²

The article consists of two, chronologically split, parts: the first deals with the period before formal external peer review was introduced in the SCH in 1997; the second with the period following that date. The central question at hand here is *why* external peer review was introduced in the ESF Standing Committee for the Humanities. The turn from internal review and critique practices to external peer review has long been a major occupation among historians of this subject (Csiszar 2016; Barany 2018; Fyfe et al. 2022). Interestingly, the term “peer review” only originated in the mid-1970s in the United States of America, while it took until the late 1970s and 1980s for external peer review to become central to the idea of scientific rigor, and institutionalized in many European journals, associations, and agencies (Baldwin 2019; Forsberg et al. 2022).

Obviously, this story only covers a very specific case study within the history of funding agencies, as it is very explicitly written from the perspective of European-level humanities funding. What is striking, however, is how “late” external peer review was introduced in the SCH, and how quickly it was further institutionalized after 1997. Before that date, a lack of selection criteria in combination with highly flexible procedures made it possible for a small elite to allocate funding (and associated prestige) based on personal convictions and ties. Though it was precisely this lack of criteria that shaped the conditions in which academic inequality could be reproduced, this hyperflexible

² Europe here having an extended geographical meaning, reaching north up to Iceland and south to Israel.



framework also – in a more positive interpretation – created an environment in which a practice of “participatory grantmaking” could blossom (Gibson 2017). When external review was finally introduced in the SCH, this was done for three distinct reasons. First, on the level of *ideas*, external review procedures were linked to fairness and transparency. Second, external reviewers could assist the committee members with the *logistical* challenge of reviewing a growing number of applications. Third, within a changing European funding landscape, optimizing external peer review procedures and expertise became a new stream of capital for the European Science Foundation. The history of peer review, here, reveals an *economic* dimension.

METHODOLOGY

Scholars who are interested in the history of funding and reviewing often deal with sources that belong to the category of “academic occluded genres”, i.e., those types of texts that “operate to support and validate the manufacturing of knowledge, directly as part of the publishing process itself, or indirectly by underpinning academic administrative processes” (Swales 1996: 46). Since these sources are often confidential or simply not conserved, histories of funding often rely on scattered archival materials, sometimes supplemented by interviews. The archives of the European Science Foundation were, however, fully deposited at the Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence when the ESF was re-branded as Science Connect in 2015. Because of this, the ESF archive provides a unique collection for scholars studying research evaluation in the late 20th century.

To reconstruct the Standing Committee for the Humanities’ history, I drew upon the specific subsection of the ESF archives made by the SCH. More specifically, I consulted minutes of panel meetings, application letters, research proposals, CVs and lists of all panel members, and internal and external reviews of both funded and non-funded projects. Though the materials deposited at the HAEU are not exhaustive – further research could, for example, reconstruct communication between the ESF and national research agencies by looking at the archives of national agencies – this collection still sheds light on the decision-making process and outcomes of the committee. The minutes of SCH panel meetings were especially useful. These were preserved in folders that also include (some of) the preparatory documents for these meetings, allowing me to estimate how many projects were funded by the SCH within this period (a list that categorizes the 273 selected projects with budget estimations is added to this article in table 1; I am certain of all calculations except for the “exploratory workshops” funded by the SCH). During meetings, panelists also regularly discussed the committee’s own procedures, as well as broader changes in the European funding landscape and the way they perceived their own organization. This article is therefore largely based on the minutes of the SCH’s meetings, and the documents submitted in preparation for these meetings.

Based on the representative lists of the SCH secretary, I also compiled a complete list of all 156 panelists who served as ESF Member Organization representatives between 1976 and 2005. For 107 of them, I have been able to retrieve the CVs they submitted at their entry to the panel, which I have used to track their affiliations and career-stages. Via application files – sometimes added as preparatory material for meetings – I have also gained insight into the forms used to apply (or lack thereof). Because not all applications were attached to meeting files, however, I have not been able

to systematically gather data on the profile of applicants.³ Finally, I conducted interviews with four panelists who served in the early and mid-1990s to finetune and double-check my interpretations of the changing committee procedures. These interviews confirmed that external peer review was introduced only at the end of the 1990s in the SCH, and that during the prior period, panelists were able to put their own proposals on the SCH’s agenda.

FROM THE SET-UP TO THE EARLY 1990S

The Standing Committee for the Humanities officially commenced its work in 1978, yet its overarching mission had already been set by a small “Working Group on the Humanities” a year earlier: the committee was to act as a catalyst for European humanities research by sponsoring collaborative research projects on a bottom-up basis (ESF-311, “Meeting 19/01/1977”; “Report 1-2/11/1977”). As a forum organization, the ESF relied on the initiative of the member organizations to put projects on the agenda. In concrete terms, this meant that from 1978 until 2012, the representatives of these organizations met at least twice each year to discuss projects and decide what to fund. In 1978, the ESF gathered representatives from twelve countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Norway, Greece, France, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark, Austria, and the UK), but by 2005 had grown significantly, with the Committee including sixteen additional members from Finland, Portugal, Sweden, Iceland, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Turkey, Estonia, Cyprus, Luxemburg, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Lithuania.

Table 1: Estimates of projects funded by the European Science Foundation Standing Committee for the Humanities, per category (1978-2012)

Research Network- ing Programmes (1978-2016)	Networks (1985-2006)	Exploratory Work- shops (1978-2013)	EURO- CORES (2001- 2015)	High-Level Research Conferences (2005-2012)	Forward Looks (2001-2008)
in preparation (1978-1988)	6 (1985-1990)	7 (1983-1987)	9 (2001- 2015)	25 (2005- 2012)	24 (2001- 2008)
4 (1988-1992)	11 (1991-1996)	unclear (1987-1998)			
2 (1991-1992)	17 (1997-2006)	14 (1998-2000)			
21 (1993-2016)		58 (2001-2005) 75 (2009-2013)			
TOT 27	TOT 34	TOT 154**	TOT 9	TOT 25	TOT 24
P.P. €175 000*	€100 000	€15 000		€ 25 000	€ 150 000
TOT €4 725 000	€ 3 400 000	€2 310 000		€625 000	€3 600 000

Sources: European Science Foundation Standing Committee for the Humanities, HUM Report 2009-2013, ESF-Online Archives, <http://archives.esf.org/home.html>, accessed 13/04/2022. Fonds European Science Foundation (ESF), boxes 353 and 328, *Historical Archives of the European Union*, Florence.

* Prices between 1979-1999 in ECU (European Currency Unit)

** Estimation based on SCH minutes of meetings.

³ This topic could potentially be explored for further research, yet, again, the archives of national funding agencies may be key to fully trace how applications do or do not end up on the SCH’s agenda, since these agencies acted as “gatekeepers”, too.

During the 34 years this committee was in existence (1978-2012), it ended up funding approximately 273 research projects and distributing around 14,5-16 million EUR (see table 1). It is difficult to precisely calculate how many projects were funded since the source material is only publicly available until 2005 and overviews of smaller projects are at times incomplete, and in any case scattered. The estimated budget also leaves aside the est. 30-45 million EUR the SCH coordinated between 2003 and 2015 for the European Commission in the EU’s *Sixth Framework Programme for Research*.

The “smaller” projects funded by the SCH were mostly “exploratory workshops” aiming at “identifying emerging fields requiring action at a European level”. Source-wise, these projects are more elusive within the ESF archives, because it is often unclear whether they took place once or twice. A handful of these exploratory workshops, however, resulted in a more fully fledged “programme” funded by the SCH. These programmes, known at first as “additional activities”, then as “à la carte programmes”, and eventually from 1990 as “scientific programmes” or “research networking programmes”, were the SCH’s more costly activities, with budgets between 150 and 200k EUR. Together with the funding of large research networks (100 000 EUR on average), this is what the SCH considered to be its core business and where it had its greatest impact (ESF-Archives, “Completed ESF Research Networking Programmes in Humanities”; table 1). In total, the SCH funded 27 programmes between 1978-2015 and 34 networks between 1985 - 2006.

Committee members

Over this period, 156 individual “representatives” – scholars representing their national research agencies – joined the committee. Since CV’s were sent out to all representatives up to ca. 1990, the archives reveal much about the profile of the representatives who entered before that date: it is safe to say these were scholars with a great prestige. This is visible, firstly, because the SCH’s representatives held a significant amount of “scientific capital” in terms of publications, awards, and prizes (ESF-1781 to ESF-1784, “Memberships”; Bourdieu 1986). Moreover, almost all committee members were full professors, and all were, of course, specialized in humanities fields (ranging from history to linguistics, and philosophy to archaeology).

Second, most committee members had close ties to the national research agencies or academies that were member organizations of the ESF before they were chosen as representatives of these organizations. In this sense, they combined their “scientific capital” with “worldly” or “academic capital” in the form of (senior) science management experience (Bourdieu 1988). Thirdly, of all 61 representatives who entered the committee before 1990, at least 39 (63.93%) also held what has been called “cosmopolitan” or “international capital”: “experiences abroad, international networks, language skills and transnational degrees” (Bühlmann et al. 2013; Benz et al. 2021). From this group, 17 (27.87%) representatives had previously engaged in explicit international academic endeavors, such as international societies and associations (table 2).

Fourth, and finally, these representatives’ collective seniority was exceptional. Those members entering before 1990 had, on average, 22.5 years of experience after finishing their doctoral degree. Though academic careers differed tremendously across European countries (Ates and Brechelmacher 2013), in terms of where panel members were in the stage of their career, they seemed to have almost all been tenured professors in a “mid-” or “later stage” of their academic career (with a few exceptions of extra-academic careers such as museum directors or heads of specific research centers) (Bazelay 2003). Moreover, most were men: before 1990, only seven women (compared with 54 men) served on the committee.

Table 2: Biodata of panelists entering the European Science Foundation’s Standing Committee for the Humanities before 1990*

	Panelists entering before 1990	Panelists entering 1990-2005**
Panelists with international experience	22	?
Panelists participating in European-level scientific endeavors	17	?
Panelist gender*	m: 54 f: 7	m: 68 f: 26
Seniority (in years between obtaining PhD-entering committee)	22,5	?
Min-Max seniority (in years between obtaining PhD-entering committee)	4-46	?
Absolute number of panelists identified (CV matched)	61 (56)	94 (6)

Sources: Fonds European Science Foundation (ESF), boxes 1781-1784, *Historical Archives of the European Union*, Florence.

* Totals may not add up because of lacking information.

** Biodata at time of entering not included in Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence.

The profile of one Greek female representative illustrates well the extraordinary reputation held by many of the panelists. The French-Greek Byzantinologist H el ene Ahrweiler served as representative of the National Hellenic Research Foundation between 1977 and 1987. During that time, she was the first ever female President of the Universit e Paris I Panth eon-Sorbonne, as well as Rector of the Academy of Paris and Chancellor of the Universities of Paris. Among her colleagues on the committee were Maurice Godelier, a world-renowned French anthropologist who at the time was also Scientific Director of the d epartement des Sciences de l’homme et de la soci et e at the French CNRS, and Olivier Reverdin, a Swiss classic philologist and politician who between 1964 and 1973 had held a seat at the Assembly of the Council of Europe, both as representative and as president. Other representatives had ties to UNESCO, domestic Ministries of Culture or Research, as well as international associations or private foundations such as the Hardt and Volkswagen Foundation (ESF-1781 to ESF-1784).

In short, the committee was made up of people with significant academic, and at times also political, influence, at both the national and international levels. Sociologically, these people qualify as an “academic elite”: “a group with disproportionate control over or access to a resource” (Khan 2012: 361).

No rigid criteria

The resource this group controlled was, of course, funding for collaborative research projects. When it came to selecting projects, the members of the SCH preferred to work with a degree of freedom and flexibility. In a joint meeting with the Standing Committee for Social Sciences in 1981, chairman John Goormaghtigh (of said committee) emphasized that “while standing committees needed to be very rigorous in their selection of programmes for Additional Activities [...] rigid criteria should not

be established” (ESF-318, “Meeting 25-26/02/1981”). Neither did the SCH use formal application questionnaires. In a similar vein, there were no strict eligibility requirements.

At the same time, the ESF did, of course, have specific goals: to foster intra-European collaboration in basic research, promote mobility and the free flow of information and ideas, and harmonize basic research activities. With these goals came three sets of assumptions: (1) ideas about exactly when and where intervention at the European level was needed, (2) assumptions about what exactly constituted ‘collaboration’, and (3) assumptions about the ‘European nature’ of a project. So, although the SCH did not have any written-down criteria, committee members certainly shared what one could call “working assumptions” – semi-institutionalized ideas about what constituted a fundable project.

First, regarding the need for intervention, panel members mainly focused on the issues of difficulty and timing. In an early meeting of 1981, they agreed that the “à la carte programmes” were intended to “initiate comparative research which would otherwise be difficult to organize” (ESF-318, “Meeting 25-26/02/1981”), most notably in fields where “the time was ripe” for a European “concentration of effort” (ESF-311, “Report 1-2/11/1977”). This concern with timeliness also translated into paying specific attention to the “urgency” of interventions. During meetings, members often emphasized that journals or fields were on the brink of “disappearing” and that European-level intervention was therefore crucial (ESF-316, “Meeting 26-27/06/1979”; ESF-318, “Meeting 9-10/10/1980”). Urgency was also connected to fields in which “duplication” was looming, meaning that there was a concern that scholars would be doing the same work at two or more places, unbeknownst to each other (ESF-319, “Meeting 17-18/01/1983”).

Second, panelists also had some specific ideas on what counted as collaboration. While there were no formal criteria about the size or intensity of collaboration, it seems as if the adagio “the more the merrier” reigned freely. Flagship projects such as the “Origins of the Modern State, 1250-1750” (1986-1992) or the “Transformation of the Roman World” (1993-1998) could bring together between 100-150 researchers and result in a series of up to seven edited volumes published by the ESF. This, however, did not mean that *everyone* could collaborate in the same capacity: if an ESF Member Organization contributed to the costs for an “à la carte” programme, said organization would be able to demand that a corresponding percentage of researchers from “their” pool participate – a practical rule known as the “principe de juste retour” (ESF-719, “Letters”). Researchers from countries not contributing to the costs could still be invited and take part in a project, though the case studies would usually be geographically located in in the countries of the financially-contributing organizations.

Third, representatives were keen to look out for projects that had a thematic “European flavour”, and with this also came assumptions of what constituted “Europe” and “Europeanness”. Though the SCH did fund large projects on China and Iran at the very beginning of its mandate, 12 out of 27 of the subsequent “additional activities” explicitly mentioned “Europe” in the title. Many others, with titles such as “The Transformation of the Roman World” or “From Natural Philosophy to Science”, also specifically placed themselves within the history of Europe. In 1987, after a long discussion about the European nature of the projects, one panelist said that “non-European cases clearly needed to be excluded (...) Russia/The Soviet Union could not be [included]” (ESF-327, “Meeting 8-9/05/1987”). Not unlike the European Commission’s or Council of Europe’s conceptualization of European history at that time (Calligaro 2017; Shore 2000), the SCH members thus often reproduced teleological ideals of Europe as a civilized whole, with roots in the classic period and an illustrious history of



cultural and scientific revolutions. When the committee discussed what they meant with the idea of a “European flavour” in history, eurocentrism reigned freely:

Europe stepped out of the spiritual and spatial confines of the Middle Ages – while at the same time reconsidering and recapturing its classical foundations – and set the sails for all modern time developments which were to become prevalent at world level (ESF-327, “Meeting 8-9/05/1987”).

In 1990 this topic was again discussed, and the committee decided that projects could qualify as having a “strong European flavour” when they dealt with “a commonly recognized European theme of focal importance” or started “from a European point of view” (ESF-331, “Meeting 10-11/12/1990”).

These three sets of implicit criteria could be freely applied thanks to a submission and selection procedure that was anything but “rigid”. Proposals could “be submitted at any level of preparation”, though those that were “in an advanced state” were unofficially granted priority (ESF-325, “Proposals received from Committee members”; ESF-327, “Report 8-9/05/1987”; ESF-325, “Meeting 2-3/06/1986”). Committee members also often reached out to other representatives on an informal basis prior to a meeting to check whether there was interest among research councils and academies to work, and – more importantly – to make funds available together. Big research agencies such as the French CNRS or Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft were often contacted first, which meant that these countries had far more influence during the decision-making process (Verbergt 2021; see also ESF-358, “Letter from M. Posner 04/10/1988”). The proposals themselves usually took the form of a short paper on a research topic or area. Members commented upon these papers during meetings, and then proposals were re-drafted and refined for the next meeting. This flexible process continued until proposals were either approved or rejected altogether. Because members typically only agreed to fund an additional activity after several rounds of back-and-forth on the proposal – which in some instances grew into a hefty document of 25 to 30 pages – the input they gave on a project clearly shows how involved committee members were, and what they considered “fundable”.

The Ethnic Groups project

The flexibility of the SCH in procedures and criteria can be illustrated by focusing on an additional activity titled “Ethnic Minorities” that was funded in 1984. A proposal had been in preparation by historians belonging to the SCH since 1982, and a one-pager was, in principle, approved by the SCH and ESF’s Executive Council in 1983 (ESF-707, “Ethnic Groups programme”). The project was reintroduced to all committee members at the first SCH meeting of 1983. There, two papers were prepared for the discussion – one by Gerald Stourzh, representative of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and one by John Herstad, President of the Nordic Co-operation Committee for Humanities Research and representative of the Norwegian Research Council for General Sciences. The latter also presented six publications to the committee as background information, of which one was written by another committee member.

The discussion of the SCH ranged from the actual name of the activity, to the timescale of the study, the choice of specific themes, and the structure of the programme. Though some members proposed to change the adjective “ethnic” to “national”, the committee decided to keep the former. The second part of the working title “Ethnic Minorities” was, however, replaced: following a suggestion from Hugh Seton-Watson, the title was changed to “Ethnic Groups” because “in certain cases the ethnic

communities to be included were (non)-dominant majorities” (ESF-319, “Meeting 21-22/02/1983”). Regarding the periodization, one representative remarked that the proposed period of 1848-1939/40 “had no particular significance for Spain” and others preferred the date to be moved back to 1815. Ultimately, the members decided that, since “it was not the intention to write narrative histories of each ethnic group [...] the timescale adopted should allow a certain flexibility and be suited to the area/group in question” (ESF-319, “Meeting 21-22/02/1983”).

All these remarks reveal just how much members were at liberty to intervene in, and collaborate on, a proposal. For all additional activities, there was always one representative closely involved in the project to keep an eye on its progress, attend preparatory meetings, and report back to the SCH. Since those duties were matched to representatives’ personal expertise, and because SCH members would often lead (a part of) the project, the panelists frequently had direct personal stakes in a project’s sponsorship once they started writing preparatory papers. Historian Gerald Stourzh, who had been arranging the Ethnic Groups project since 1982, published a volume with the Austrian Academy of Sciences on equal opportunities for national groups in Austria after the project was finished. In Norway, John Herstad was involved in a large project on Kven and Sami history and language, which was included in the programme (Mykland 2009; Landsem 2017). Another similar example is that of medievalist Jean-Philippe Genet, who became involved in the project on the origins of the modern state, as well as some workshops on the use of computers for historical research – two topics he was working on at that time.

Participatory grantmaking?

This method of selecting and funding stands in stark contrast to evaluation practices and ideas on “good governance” as we now know them: at work here was a funding body with no fixed criteria, no transparent communication on its procedures, and no bottom-up calls for projects. Members were highly ranked professors who were selected by member institutions, and who were free to evaluate and reformulate ideas and projects in which they personally had high stakes. This was humanities’ politics at a very high level – albeit with limited budgets that constantly needed to be (re)negotiated – infused with a Europhile agenda and preconceived ideas about the glory of European civilization.

That, of course, is a perspective retrospectively formed. Yet the archives reveal that this was also a committee in which members earnestly believed in the procedures they used and their resulting outcomes. The feedback they provided on proposals was undoubtedly for the purpose of improvement and enrichment. Scientific quality and independence were concerns; yet so was the “need” for intervention and a belief in the strength of collaboration and feedback. A less negative interpretation of this collaborative process might be that it was highly “participatory grantmaking” (Gibson 2017). This practice, which is often discussed in the context of philanthropy, aims to connect grant-makers more closely with the communities they serve. The goal is to match expectations and keep a conversation going after funds have been awarded (Gibson and Bokoff 2018). As the name reveals, participation is key, and participating, the SCH members certainly did. The back-and-forth discussions and the building of tight relationships between the SCH representatives and the participants in SCH projects were in this sense very much like the “two-way communication” and network-building promoted in contemporary participatory grantmaking. This flexible involvement and selection process, however, changed radically over the course of the 1990s.



THE NEW ERA: ACCOUNTABILITY, EFFICIENCY, CONSULTANCY

Up to 1986, the SCH had no formal procedures or guidelines for its own members. While this started shifting in the late 1980s, when new representatives entered the committee and an internal leaflet on the SCH’s mission was produced (ESF-326, “Leaflet”), the SCH only launched open calls for workshops and publicly communicated on its procedures in 1997. At that same time, the committee introduced external peer review, which became which later became increasingly central to its procedures and institutional identity. To understand how and why these changes came about for the specific case of the ESF/SCH, it is important to first consider the evolution of the European funding landscape over the course of the 1990s.

European research policy in the 1990s

The early 1990s were a time when meta-reflection about research assessment was prominent in the European milieu: sociologists and policymakers claimed that the scientific system and its “ethos” were undergoing significant changes (Hackett 1990; Elzinga 1997), and in general the discourse on “scientific accountability” became increasingly dominant. “Science”, so it was argued, needed to connect more to “society”, and in the political aftermath of 1980s austerity regimes and a deficit in government spending, scholars were expected to explain how they spent taxpayers’ money and what they offered societies in return. Inside governments and among academics, this led to a growing concern with accountability, efficiency, and transparency in research funding. Ideas about “good governance” taken from the New Public Management movement thus entered universities, funding agencies, and journal boards across Europe. Though most of the governance devices developed during this period – blind and external review practices, for example, but also bibliometric impact measurement systems – were developed for the natural and life sciences, these research assessment tools and discourses also, albeit somewhat slower, reached the humanities (Ochsner et al. 2016).

Over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, this discourse on “good governance” in science spread across Europe – not in the least because the European Commission also scaled up its Framework Programmes for Research in the context of the Maastricht Treaty and produced more reports on research policy (Guzzetti 1995). The fact that the EU became increasingly active in the field of research policy was somewhat problematic for the ESF, since this organization had since 1974 seen itself as Europe’s most prominent platform for research scoping, planning, and networking on a European scale. To preserve its relevance, the ESF Executive Council therefore reformulated the ESF’s mission in 1993 through a “strategic reappraisal”.

In the 1993 reappraisal, the ESF stated that it would continue to be an organization at the forefront of European fundamental research but also actively begin to bring together and share science management and research ethics expertise across Europe – including Eastern Europe (ESF-307, “Documents”). Note, here, that “science management” was a term deemed applicable to all sciences, including the social sciences and humanities. The ESF thereby saw itself as one of the prime promoters and developers of universally useful “good governance” practices across Europe. Entirely in line with this view, the ESF in 1993 highlighted a future in consultancy services, especially services to the European Commission, since this would allow the organization to grow and become less dependent on the financial contributions of member organizations. Though this strategic reappraisal was only fully realized in 2015, when the ESF became a new organization called Science Connect,

this strategy did work to a certain extent. In 1985, there were 17 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members working for the ESF; by mid-1993, there were 28 (ESF-337, "ESF: The Next Decade"). This number almost doubled again by 2000 with 51 FTE working for the ESF, and, eventually, in 2004 there were 104 FTE managing 52 million EUR amongst which was, indeed, funding from the EU (ESF-Online Archives, "EUROCORES Scheme").

New evaluation procedures

For the Standing Committee for the Humanities, this reappraisal, together with the EU's growing emphasis on European research, had very specific effects. Though a "Targeted Humanistic Research Programme" on "European Cultural Research" was cut in 1994 by the European Commission, the emergence of the Targeted Research Programme in the Social Sciences (TSER) in the same year forced the Standing Committee for the Humanities to expressly distinguish itself from EU-funded programmes. For the first time, the SCH began to communicate openly to its audience with a promo-campaign to the academic community (ESF- 361, "Reflections"). The SCH presented itself as a bridge between the "top-down" European Commission and the European humanities community, and immediately prepared a first open call for projects for the "Exploratory Workshops" (ESF-343, "Meeting 7/03/1997"). In reaction to the ESF Reappraisal, the SCH also sketched "a strategy for Humanities research in Europe in the 21st Century" in 1995 (ESF-360, "Agenda 29/03/1995"), and lobbying activities for the humanities were undertaken shortly after (ESF-360, "Notes 12/09/1995"; see also Rees 1997).

In general, however, the introduction of good governance and accountability measures in the SCH took some time. Ideas about "science" in connection to "society" for example, did not charm all panelists within the SCH – a finding that was confirmed in two interviews with former panelists. Minutes of a meeting from 1987 reveal that some panelists were afraid "to overestimate the potential of the humanities [for future problem-solving] and to raise or nourish expectations which could only be disappointed", whereas others (from Nordic countries) were keener to connect humanities research to current affairs and society (ESF-327, "Meeting 8-9/05/1987"). A few years later, however, the general tone changed: in 1994 it was stated that "some connection with key problems of the present world has to be made explicit (...) this does not imply any servitude to the priorities of the rapidly changing political agenda; it simply means that we may become more aware of the value of our results for our own world (ESF-359, "Preparatory agenda 9/06/1994").

This slow process is also visible in the critical attitude of the ESF Secretariat towards the SCH itself. In a review of the SCH ordered by the ESF Secretariat in 1993, it was noted that the SCH had at times been "too involved" in the "Ethnic Groups" project, and the document also noted that it would have been better to leave the scholars "entirely free to control the directive [sic] and methodology of their work" (ESF-337, "Review"). In 1998, the ESF secretariat told the SCH outright that their evaluations should be based on external peer review, and that there was a "general problem with the evaluation procedure" (ESF-344, "Meeting 28/03/1998"). Among SCH committee members, however, there was a strong conviction that they did *review* the projects they funded, just not externally and perhaps in a less formal fashion than the Secretariat might wish for.

Within this slow transition, the publication of the first call for workshops in 1998 proved to be a true turning point for the SCH's internal evaluation procedures. Wim Blockmans, chairman of the committee, pleaded for a "bottom-up" approach and emphasized that transparency on procedures and selection criteria was now vital (ESF-343, "Meeting 4/10/1997"). His approach to the issue



seems to have been driven by a legitimate conviction about the necessity of good governance procedures: he was wary of biases and concerned with fair evaluation practices. Blockmans himself was a medievalist from the University of Leiden in The Netherlands, a context in which managerial forms of research assessment were already very present in the 1980s. Upon his suggestion, it was agreed that two external evaluators would be asked to review each application for funding. These peers could not be from the same country as the applicants, and the maximum time for their response would be four weeks (ESF-343, "Meeting 4/10/1997", "Meeting 14/06/1997"). Though there seems to have been no fixed application form – given that the very "genre" of "grant writing" was still under development in national as well as international contexts (Serrano Velarde 2018) – candidates were asked to provide specific information on their project, including the CV of the coordinator, an overview of other potential funding sources, and a summary of the project and its participants. Gone was the proposal form flexibility of the 1980s, and in came clear requirements.

This introduction of a new spirit of science management in the SCH was probably aided by the fact that, on a logistical level, efficiency was not just desirable but became increasingly necessary. After the SCH started investing in "making itself better known to the scientific community" (ESF-360; ESF-361) by publishing the call for workshops, many more applications were sent in 1998 and 1999. This led to two decisions aimed at lessening the panelists' workload: (1) a Core Group of representatives would make a pre-selection and (2) the SCH would ask input from external referees. Since its set-up, the committee had been working with semi-external experts who were added to the committee for specific topics (such as computer research, linguistics, and modern history) – one of these experts even served on the committee for twelve consecutive years. In addition, there had been informal consultations with external experts on the initiative panelists (ESF-707, "Note SCH Secretariat"; ESF-720, "Review reports"). From 1999/2000 on, however, individual external referees were matched to each workshop proposal.

That concerns about efficiency were central in the introduction of external peer review in the SCH is particularly visible in the outline of the "research assessment forms", that appear in the archives after 1997. In those forms, evaluators are asked to score projects from 1-5 and to base their judgment on the most important – and deliberately left vague – criterion of "scientific excellence" (ESF-342, "Network proposal"). The brevity of these forms shows how they were designed for the quick processing of a large and rapidly increasing number of applications; most completed forms in the archives only have a few sentences of feedback attached to them, and during meetings only the highest rated applications would be discussed (ESF-345, "Assessment forms"). Where in the 1980s and early 1990s all representatives would be able to comment on a proposal (and often did so elaborately), from 1997 onwards proposals were allocated to two representatives who briefly reported on them to other representatives.

The coalescence of considerations of efficiency and accountability in the installment of a peer review system shows that these new procedures were probably both interventions at the level of ideas about management as well as management solutions. In Melissa Baldwin's words, the turn to peer review was as much a "logistical" one as it was "epistemological" (Baldwin 2019). The fact that external peer review was never formally implemented for the SCH's "à la carte programmes", but only for its workshops, and later, networks, highlights this point: "fairness" and "transparency" could only go so far. Even after chair Wim Blockmans mentioned several times that the SCH's procedure "may even cause eyebrows to be raised as members of the SCH might be seen by the larger scientific community as helping themselves", the committee never published an open call for its main funding instrument (ESF-361, "Bottom-up memo 23/11/1996"). By 2003, this situation had not changed: when the SCH

was formally audited by ALLEA (All European Academies), this report identified "a lack of transparency regarding the Standing Committee procedures", as well as a "privileged position of some countries in the decision-making procedures" (ESF-355, "ALLEA Evaluation", 16). Regarding the refereeing process specifically, ALLEA stated that "the current situation concerning refereeing must be regarded as something approaching a crisis": both "referee fatigue" and the "haphazard manner in which the Secretariats currently select referees" needed to be addressed (ESF-355, "ALLEA Evaluation", 22).

A new mission for the SCH: becoming consultants

Perhaps surprisingly, this 2003 ALLEA report was very much welcomed in the committee, and the optimization of (external) review procedures to the highest possible standards was the topic of nearly every meeting thereafter. When the report for the first time raised questions about the SCH's membership, namely that the selection-process for the chair was deemed insufficiently transparent, and the gender balance in the committee was a cause for concern, the committee agreed wholeheartedly. While there were already many more women entering after 1990 – out of the 94 members entering the committee after 1990, 26 (27.66%) were female – this ratio of one to four was deemed insufficient (ESF-366, "Comments on ALLEA report").

This increased interest for procedure and membership optimization and willingness to consider external critiques shows that discourses on good governance and science management became increasingly accepted by the SCH. This, however, is only one side of the story: institutional competition seems to have been at the back of committee members' minds as well. Knowing all too well that the very existence of the European Science Foundation was being challenged by the European Commission's investment in a European Research Council (ERC), the committee was keen on managing its reputation and implementing the highest standards in research evaluation (ESF-366, "Draft minutes 18/02/2004"; König 2017). What is more, when it became clear that national governments would invest in the ERC and that budgets for ESF project funding were diminishing, the SCH increasingly invested in, and even capitalized on, its external peer review expertise.⁴ In 2004, the first female Chair of the SCH, Gretty Mirdal, gave a speech to the SCH committee in which she stated that "it is difficult to go on pretending that we are a funding organization, when we have such limited funds" (ESF-356, "Meeting 22-23/10/2004"). The future of the SCH, according to Mirdal, thus lay in a specific "working group on science policy" for the humanities, and in the field of "scientific self-reflection and the organization of knowledge." The better the SCH's (knowledge about) review procedures, the brighter their future in science management, and the more chances for the SCH to survive.

Within less than a decade, the SCH thus went from a committee focused on handing out funding with full flexibility, to a peer review expertise center offering services to research agencies all over Europe. In 2003, a "Refereeing task force" was organized, which announced that the "ESF is moving through a potentially important transition phase in its institutional history" (ESF-366, "Task force"). Between 2000 and 2010, the SCH set up a large database of referees, built a rating system for humanities journals called the "European Reference Index for the Humanities" (Pontille and Torny 2010), and audited the evaluation processes of various European research agencies. Not all representatives were happy with this situation, as some expressed the concern "that Standing

⁴ Funding for the network scheme ended in 2004, and no new programmes were initiated after 2010.



Committees may lose much of their actual power” and feared “that ESF is becoming a bureaucratic structure rather than focused on scientific research” (ESF-366, “Meeting 16/06/2005”).

These voices, in the end, turned out to be correct. In 2012, the committee was officially revoked, and the aptly titled “Scientific Review Group for the Humanities” took its place. In 2015, the European Science Foundation itself was rebranded as “Science Connect”: an organization that manages grant evaluation processes to help “research funders, programmes and universities to identify the best projects and applications” (Science Connect 2022). Science Connect does not hand out funding, but assists in reviewing.

CONCLUSION

This article has questioned why and when external peer review practices were introduced in the European Science Foundation’s Standing Committee for the Humanities. Prior to the incorporation of external peer review in the SCH in 1997, committee members decided on funding applications without fixed procedures or criteria. Applications came in various forms – as papers, long and short, or orally explained ideas – and evaluation could take months, even years. No open calls were ever launched, and representatives often had personal stakes in a project’s execution. Acting as experts, the representatives gave detailed intellectual feedback on proposals, changing titles, project periodization, and research questions; they also suggested people who could participate and/or lead a project. As removed as this practice may seem from current grant review procedures, it is detectable still in contemporary discussions about the importance of “participatory grantmaking”. While biases or gender quota were of little concern, close cooperation between grant-givers and receivers certainly was.

One might think that, when peer review was introduced at the end of the 1990s, this was done primarily to “correct” this previous situation – springing from clear ideas about right and wrong ways to manage review processes. This is true to a certain extent: the Chair of the Committee in 1996 mentioned that “the SCH might be seen by the larger scientific community as helping themselves”, which clearly was a “bad” thing. The installment of external peer review processes in the SCH in 1998 also neatly fitted into the ESF’s larger science management discourse on “good governance” procedures, which adheres to the values of “fairness”, “transparency” and “accountability”.

Still, the committee only introduced open calls and transparency about its procedures for a limited set of funding channels, and not for its large-scale programmes. A critical history of the introduction of external peer review in the SCH shows that external review practices were only reserved for funding schemes where it was also *logistically* interesting to involve external reviewers. As more applications came in, the committee itself could not process them all, and so, for the SCH in specific, ideas about good governance in research assessment were selectively introduced only where they were desirable as well as necessary.

In addition to the fact that the introduction of external peer review was considered the “right” and “efficient” thing to do (categories that were, obviously, connected to one another), the history of the SCH also reveals a third motivation behind this development. The timing of the SCH’s introduction of peer review procedures at the end of the 1990s, as well as its focus on gaining expertise and building review infrastructure after 2003, turned out to be crucial to the ESF’s *institutional and economic survival*. Because the European Research Council took over the role of funding fundamental research on a European level in 2007, the ESF lost its relevance as a funder of research.



By exporting its expertise on external peer review to other research agencies, and by assisting the EU in “science management”, the SCH secured much-needed capital.

This last finding at once shows the value and the limitations of studying the history of peer review via in-depth historical case studies such as this one. The ESF, indeed, was a rather unique player in the international research funding landscape, and the history of peer review it reveals is a unique one, too. To understand at a more theoretical level why and how review practices change, more comparative work that considers the differences between the humanities and other fields, as well as between various geographical and institutional contexts, would be necessary (Gläser and Velarde 2018). What this study does confirm, however, is that international agencies can function as important hubs for knowledge exchange and provide the locus from which specific evaluation practices are often imported (back) to national levels (a point also made in Nedeva et al. 2012). More concretely: the SCH has, since the turn of the twenty-first century, acted as a consultant for many national research agencies, and in the form of Science Connect it continues to do so today. This history of the ESF thus reveals that review practices change not only under the influence of new ideas (here especially ideas about accountability and fairness), or common-sensical practical considerations – a story found in the “happiness narrative” of the academic elite where managerial changes are generally interpreted as morally driven (Ylijoki 2019). In a changing and complex research landscape, international agencies have also consciously planned to capitalize on the export of specific evaluation practices.



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Author biographies

Marie-Gabrielle Verbergt is a PhD student at the Department of History of Ghent University, Belgium. She was trained as a historian (KU Leuven, UGent) and sociologist (University of Chicago, as Fulbright Grantee and Belgian American Educational Foundation Fellow). Her dissertation focuses on the history of European funding for historical research from the 1970s to the present, which includes research on the European Union's Framework Programmes for Research, the European Science Foundation, and the European Research Council.