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Assessing the Appraisal of Research Quality in Social Sciences and Humanities: A Case Study of the University of Montenegro

Dijana Vučković
University of Montenegro, Faculty of Philosophy
Sanja Pekovic
University of Montenegro, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management
Stevo Popović
University of Montenegro, Faculty of Sport and Physical Education
Jovana Janinovic
University of Montenegro, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management

Abstract

Background: A noteworthy attempt has recently been made to extend the same or analogous evaluation criteria traditionally employed in natural and technical sciences to social sciences and humanities domains. However, this endeavor has sparked considerable reactions among researchers, leading to robust discussions and debates. **Objectives:** This research aims to describe the scholars' perception of the research quality evaluation in Montenegro's social sciences and humanities. **Methods/Approach:** Focus-group interviews in which 25 interlocutors from various fields of social sciences and humanities were used. The participants discussed the given topic in five focus group interviews and were prompted by questions that specified the topic. **Results:** Different perceptions occur within the social sciences and humanities and are visible within individual areas. Respondents think that the current way of evaluating the results of research work in social sciences and humanities ignores the specificities of research methodologies and practices. **Conclusions:** The respondents show a common element of perception, i.e., that the research quality evaluation in the social sciences and humanities must be multidimensional, meaning that it must include the necessary indicators adjusted to concrete research field as much as possible but also contain agreeably qualitative criteria.

Keywords: social sciences and humanities; research quality; research quality perception; qualitative vs. quantitative evaluation

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Introduction - Statement of the problem

Evaluation of the quality of scientific research in the social sciences and humanities (SS&Hs) has become one of the issues that cause significant interest in the international community of researchers (Moed, 2005). Some research institutions are particularly committed to defining quality indicators and are trying to implement a bottom-up approach by adjusting the opinions of social and humanities researchers (Ochsner et al., 2014). There are often situations in which the method of evaluating the quality of research in the natural and technical sciences is mirrored in SS&Hs, which induces radical changes in research methodologies and in the practice of publication. In this regard, *The Leiden Manifesto* for research metrics (Hicks et al., 2015) suggests that quantitative indicators must be applied cautiously, under the nature and character of the research, as well as the most frequent usage of research work and its publication in each field.

Part of the problem is that modern ways of scientific communication and related new practices of the so-called visibility and competitiveness of universities and researchers mainly recognize mechanisms in which natural and technical science achievements are compared. Impact factors, h-indexes, and other scientometric parameters were formulated and derived from the practice of sciences in these fields. In contrast, SS&Hs do not have or do not recognize sufficient compatibility with the previously mentioned scientometric parameters. They strongly depend on qualitative evaluation (peer review) and are reserved for quantification in the research assessment.

The situation in European developing countries is even more critical for SS&H researchers. Notably, the subject of research evaluation is not significantly examined in this region (Grančay et al., 2017). For instance, in Serbia, as found by Urošević and Pavlović (2013), the research evaluation system produces a clear demotivating effect on researchers working in the social sciences. Moreover, Grančay et al. (2017) found that some researchers (in economics) from ex-communist countries publish mainly in local or "predatory" journals intending to achieve the conditions for academic advancement. In the same vein, Pajić (2015) concluded that the policies of European developing countries are too formal and more oriented towards the quantity than the quality of publications.

In 2016, the academic and scientific promotion criteria were adopted in Montenegro. Therefore, the empirical research presented in this paper was conducted in 2019, and the discussion in this study refers to the criteria adopted before that year. These criteria foresee significant changes compared to the previous one from 2004 in evaluating the quality and quantity of research work, which many scientists from the SS&H have not positively assessed. New rules for doctoral studies are defined along with the criteria based on the same principles that form the criteria. Debates and discussions on both critical documents were widespread.

To define an acceptable evaluation framework for SS&H, it is necessary first to empirically analyze the opinions and attitudes of members of relevant communities. The primary focus of this article is to examine previous literature and the opinions of relevant communities to identify suitable policy implications. Additional background to the evaluation in SS&H is presented in Section 2. In Section 3, we introduce the qualitative methodology. Section 4 presents the analysis findings, while Section 5 presents a discussion and concludes this paper.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have discussed the various aspects of this complex topic regarding the evaluation of SS&H (Nederhof, 2006; Giménez-Toledo & Román-Román, 2009; Engels et al., 2012; Ochsner et al., 2012; Giménez -Toledo et al., 2013; Ochsner et al., 2013; Gogolin et al., 2014; Ochsner et al., 2014; Hicks et al., 2015; Grosu et al., 2022; Janinovic et al., 2020). As determined by Ochsner et al. (2016), existing procedures for evaluation "do not include an explicit understanding of quality" (p. 44) in the field of humanistic studies, to a significant extent in social sciences (Hicks et al., 2015; Zuccala, 2012), and especially in inter- and trans-disciplinary areas of research for which evaluation procedures need to be created (Belcher et al., 2016; Nagy, 2016; Hunady et al., 2017; Pejić Bach et al., 2023; Šuštaršić et al., 2022; Dubreta, 2014). A quantitative way of evaluating research becomes dominant, although extensive studies indicate that the indicators have "a weak theoretical link to quality" (Brooks, 2005, p. 1).

This topic is present worldwide (Hazelkorn, 2011). Still, a relatively small number of studies aim to construct a network of indicators, i.e., a particular matrix for assessment in social and humanistic sciences. Exceptions, such as the Swiss project (Ochsner et al., 2012; Ochsner et al., 2013; Ochsner et al., 2014; Perić et al., 2013) that focused on establishing a complex and thorough assessment matrix for humanistic sciences are very rare.

The assessment of the quality of research work in natural and technical sciences has long reached consensus in the international community and is accepted by researchers, with many parameters and indicators being followed, tested, and reviewed (Hicks et al., 2015; Moed, 2005). This is entirely expected regarding the nature of research in these sciences, the multi-decade practice, and the so-called linearity in producing scientific knowledge. However, such a framework is lacking in SS&Hs.

The SS&Hs are attributed to the same or similar natural and technical sciences measurements without different quality assessment measures. This is promoted and supported by internet services, such as databases and other tools with which numerous research data sources are stored in electronic form and easily accessible for numerous calculations and analyses. Hazelkorn (2011) points to the development of such a vision of using indicators and, in particular, on the scientometric boom.

Many universities interested in global visibility and position on international rankings apply similar metric qualifications through benchmarking in researcher ranking to all groups of science: natural, social, and humanistic (Hazelkorn, 2011; Hicks et al., 2015). This often provokes strong disapproval on the part of researchers from the SS&Hs, and they raise many reasons that are opposed to such a unification of different sciences (Stack, 2016), which in some cases may lead to the disappearance of research fields (McGettigan, 2013). The following assumption is of particular significance:

> Psychology, psychiatry, and other social sciences related to medicine, health, and economics are more similar to science fields and show good yet not excellent ISI coverage. Other social sciences, including sociology, political science, education, and anthropology, tend to show more resemblance to the humanities, where ISI coverage is moderate (Moed, 2005, p. 148).

Such conclusions of the scientometrists should be one of the bases for defining the matrix that will evaluate the quality of research in SS&Hs. Under the term 'the matrix', in this paper, we mean the network of assessment elements (What is assessed?) and the corresponding quality indicators (What achievements are expected? and/or What is the expected level of achievement?).

In addition, the nature of the research process – concretized through appropriate methodology – must also influence the quality of the research. *The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics* (Hicks et al., 2015) emerged. Its authors cite ten principles that

must be respected in each assessment research to avoid using scientometric parameters incorrectly or contrary to their real meaning and significance.

The application of quantitative indicators causes different reactions among researchers. Some are completely adapted to the new assessment method (mostly those whose research is "more related" to the sciences that most often use quantitative methodology based on statistics). At the same time, many do not agree with strictly quantitative ways of evaluating their research work and perceive a serious threat in quantification (Hazelkorn, 2011; McGettigan, 2013). Between these two extremes, there is a whole range of researchers who are not exclusive and open to changing the way of evaluation but doing so in a manner that would respect the specifics of the sciences in which they are involved. The experiences of colleagues in sciences may and must be used, but this does not mean literally taking over (or even imposing!) parameters that are not essentially compatible with the nature of the research process in SS&Hs. In this regard, "It must be noted that even within a single subfield, different approaches or paradigms may reveal different publication and referencing characteristics" (Moed, 2005, p. 149). In other words, a one-size-fits-all approach does not fit at all for research evaluation.

Differences in research methodology and constructing knowledge between natural and technical sciences, on the one side, and SS&Hs, on the other, must also be reflected in evaluating research work and its results. Some of the most discussed differences are:

Nature of knowledge process - nonlinear vs linear knowledge. Researchers in the sciences necessarily rely directly on the state of the art in their field of study (Archambault et al., 2006) because building the knowledge system is linear. In the SS&Hs, the situation is not necessarily like that because these sciences develop many parallel paradigms, which are simultaneously valid. Research suggests a great deal of difference in the age of references in natural or SS&Hs (Glänzel & Schoepflin, 1999), which is directly related to the way of the production of knowledge.

Individual vs. team research. While the natural sciences are strongly associated with large-scale laboratories and teamwork, the SS&Hs are more individual and for smaller groups of researchers (Hellqvist, 2010). With that in mind, monodisciplinary or interdisciplinary research concepts are also directly related. Teamwork becomes more efficient when interdisciplinary, while individual research is almost necessarily monodisciplinary. Finkenstaedt (1990) highlights the individual nature of research in the humanities as an essential factor influencing the slowdown in the quantitative assessment of research quality. The number of authors involved in the research is directly reflected in the impact of this research (Glänzel & Schubert, 2004). It is not realistic, for example, to expect that the same or nearly equal number of citations be accomplished from research conducted by an individual in comparison to the research conducted by a few hundred scientists (such studies are often in Physics, for example). Individuality in research necessarily leads to lower productivity. With social sciences, the situation is somewhat different, and research in smaller teams is more common.

Publication in English or national languages. Humanities researchers often call this group of sciences an identity one, and social researchers are oriented toward specific societies and their problems. These scientists are particularly committed to publishing in national languages because they want to preserve, develop, and study them. In addition, these scholars consider it their duty to make a difference in a specific society and to publish for that society in the community language (Hicks et al., 2015). Nederhof et al. (1989) associate these differences with the local orientation of SS&Hs. Bibliometric indicators are critical for assessing international influence but are not a

sufficient indicator of the quality of research (Nederhof et al., 1989). This is also the third principle of *The Leiden Manifesto*: "Protect excellence in locally relevant research" (Hicks et al., 2015). For example, *The Leiden Manifesto* states an absurd situation in which Spanish sociologists used American data to publish in highly quoted journals in WoS, which are dominantly published in the U.S. in English. Research shows that more and more researchers accept this practice (Engels et al., 2012).

Type of publication. Researchers in the natural sciences are more oriented toward publishing in scientific journals, while others are more focused on writing books. Glänzel and Schoepflin (1999) point out that quality indicators must consider the different characters of publications, serial and monographic. Hemlin (1996) found some similarities in publishing research papers in the SS&Hs and differences in publishing frequency. Giménez-Toledo and Román-Román (2009) estimate the possibilities of evaluating monographs; the publisher's estimation does this, but in the continuation of the research of the book evaluation, it is emphasized that the best way to evaluate is reading the publication itself (Giménez-Toledo et al., 2013). However, some research confirms the change in the publication of research in the SS&Hs in international databases (Engels et al., 2012), whereby social sciences adapt faster to journalistic requirements than the humanities do.

Quantitative vs. qualitative research methodology. The evaluation of research quality must align with the nature of the research methodology, which is based on the essence of the phenomena that specific sciences deal with and which is reflected in the way of publication. The natural and technical sciences are predominantly investigated in laboratories, so the experiment is an appropriate method. Some social sciences are prone to a quantitative research approach, which directly corresponds to the levels of measurement available to them. For example, sports science has the possibility of direct measurements, which reflects the overall methodology of scientific research work, primarily quantitative and used with the most reliable methods of parametric statistics (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Economic sciences also use direct measurements and calculations; econometrics has been developed, and the same thing can be said for psychology – psychometry has wide usage. Very different in this respect are sciences such as sociology, educational sciences, etc., in which rare direct measurements and qualitative methodology have been developed equally with the quantitative (Moed, 2005; Swygart-Hobaugh, 2004). In recent decades, through a general belief in quantification, qualitative research has been actively marginalized (Gogolin et al., 2014; Swygart-Hobaugh, 2004). This leads to an unwanted reduction of poly-methodism to mono-methodism (Chatterji, 2008; Elliott, 2001; Howe, 2004). The qualitative methodology with interpretative and critical abilities is equivalent to the humanities (Hemlin, 1996), where many papers are written without a specific explanation of research methods (Lamont, 2009).

It is evident that the SS&Hs themselves are not homogeneous, and their distinction from natural or technical areas is considerably higher, and that it is practically absurd to compare one science to others. However, some common elements should be found within the social and/or humanistic sciences. In each research study, however, it is evident that common quality indicators are difficult to attain even in relatively related scientific areas, such as the educational sciences (Gogolin et al., 2014).

All these factors essentially shape the research itself, directly reflected in the individual work's quality evaluation (and impact). Numerous studies have shown that the use of ISI Citation Indexes in the SS&Hs must be made in a fundamentally different way concerning their application in natural and technical sciences (Bridges, 2009; Glänzel, 1996; Hazelkorn, 2011; Hicks, 2004; Hicks et al., 2015; Lewison, 2001; Nederhof & Zwaan, 1991; Nederhof & van Raan, 1993; Nederhof, 2006).

The main question is which type of evaluation to use: quantitative assessment, qualitative (informed peer review), or, possibly, some combination of both. Besides, it is important to develop appropriate quantitative measurements for specific fields. Donovan (2007) points out that using only quantitative parameters to evaluate research quality in the SS&Hs is impossible. This is important because the concepts of research orientation, topic, methodology, and related factors are very different from science to science and consider the broader socio-economic-political image in which research is conducted. Bazeley (2010) points to the exceptional attention given to research performance, which is increasingly evident and is the factor that necessarily implies the need for the SS&Hs to develop appropriate methodologies for assessing the quality of research. In defining the conceptual framework for research performance, the basic elements are engagement, task orientation, research practice and intellectual processes, and dissemination (Bazeley, 2010), for which the visibility of research results is necessary in the modern world.

In direct relation to visibility is the so-called impact and other quantitative measurements. Brewer (2011) concentrates on impact, its significance for researchers and the community of scientists, and so many important dilemmas for this notable term. Brewer's research (2011) raises many questions, points to dilemmas, and, perhaps most importantly, emphasizes the need for a phenomenon of impact to open constructive dialogue in the academic community. Citation analysis, on which the impact directly relies, has serious constraints concerning the SS&Hs (Butler & Visser, 2006). Specifically, work with serious methodological or other disadvantages can be cited as a negative example. In addition, many citations may not have the intention of successful research if they are not based on the most interesting topics in the world. Nederhof (2006) did citation analysis in SS&Hs and pointed to numerous limitations in applying the same scientometric methods. Evaluation of the quality of research in SS&Hs must be expanded with elements better suited to the nature of these sciences than citation indexes and impact factors. Zuccala (2012) considers peer review the best way to evaluate quality in SS&Hs, while impact factor(s) can be a secondary supplement in impact monitoring.

This study seeks to take the initiative in empirically examining the perceptions of the academic community toward the evaluation of SS&H while simultaneously proposing a suitable framework.

Methodology

Research Context

Criteria for academic and scientific rankings at the University of Montenegro from 2004 were common to all areas and implied a qualitative and quantitative assessment. The qualitative assessment section indicates that the applicants must have references for the relevant area and work recognized within the domestic and international public as appropriate. Some articles from *Criteria* are subject to interpretation. For instance, Article 12, which defines the references for promotion to the position of associate professor, indicates that the person to be promoted should also satisfy the following:

- *At least two articles, from which at least one should be realized after the previous promotion, must be recognized by the international and domestic public as a significant contribution to science or must have great significance for national or state sovereignty or culture (Criteria for academic and scientific promotion2004, Article 12).*

In Article 13 (referring to the promotion to the full professor position), such requests are duplicated. Article 12 is not unambiguous, so social and humanities researchers

mostly interpreted it one way and natural and technical science researchers another. The opinion of the others was overwhelming, so these articles were directly recognized as a request for articles in journals from SSCI or A&HCI lists for SS&Hs SCI for natural and technical sciences. Candidates who have not published articles from this category did not meet the criteria for a higher promotion, regardless of the other elements of the bibliography.

The *Criteria* adopted in 2016 were more explicit in this respect, so the relevant articles point out the research published in the mentioned databases as a necessary condition for the promotion process (Criteria for academic and scientific promotion, 2016). The regulations related to doctoral studies followed in parallel with the *Criteria*. To become a Ph.D. supervisor in the social sciences and/or humanities, one needed to have three original research papers published in journals indexed in SSCI or A&HCI in the previous five years.

Such an interpretation of the Criteria for academic and scientific promotion (2016), the procedures for the promotion process, and approval for Ph.D. supervisor have provoked disapproval among many social and humanities researchers. The transition to the described interpretation of Criteria for academic and scientific promotion (2004) occurred in 2014. To comply with the requirements, the Scientific Committee has been established at the University of Montenegro, whose task is to review the electoral procedure and give the Senate an opinion on fulfilling the conditions for the promotion process. The Committee is not "above" the other bodies involved in monitoring the electoral procedure; on the contrary, the basic councils, the Social Sciences Council, and the Committee bring independent opinions and send them to the Senate. However, while the councils are led by the reviewers' opinions (qualitative-quantitative estimates), the Scientific Committee focuses on the quantitative features of the bibliography, i.e., to determine whether the candidate has worked in Clarivate Analytics databases. If so, how many of these works exist? What is the candidate's copyright status on published papers (first, leading, second, etc. author)?

Research design

Our research aims to establish the perception of the quality assessment of research work in the SS&Hs at the University of Montenegro. We have chosen a qualitative methodology, the focus-group technique (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Fern, 2001), which will provide the phenomenological concept of research (Wilig & Stainton Rogers, 2008) that will enable us to observe "the world as it occurs in the experience of human beings within certain contexts and in certain times" (Vilig, 2016, p. 187). The results should serve as a part of the material in future activities to improve procedures for evaluating the quality of scientific research work in SS&H in Montenegro.

We have conducted focus groups with this topic set as a problem issue: How do scientists from the field of work estimate the quality of research evaluation in the field?

Perception is an important psychological phenomenon that significantly influences researchers' overall behavior in scientific work. It is based on the beliefs, attitudes, and values that the researchers have and on which they function (Fish, 2010).

This topic has been discussed through a series of questions:

- Is there any agreement on evaluating the quality of scientific research work among researchers from the same scientific field employed at your faculty?
- Is that assessment applied in similar institutions in the country or abroad?
- Does the academic community you belong to (university) agree with that assessment?
- Is it better to assess the quality of research in your scientific area by employing indicator-based evaluation or in some other way?

- Do you acquire better results via qualitative or quantitative research in your scientific area?
- Assess the possibility of cooperation in research in your science field- is it more suited to teamwork or individual research?
- Assess the possibility of interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary research in your scientific field.
- What are the possibilities of internationalizing the results of your research?

Data Collection

Focus-group interviews lasted for one hour each and were organized face-to-face. We conducted a total of five half-structured interviews. The groups had four to six members and were sufficiently homogeneous, i.e., in one group, there were researchers from the same field, except in the fifth focus group, which was mixed. All the interviews were recorded on a tape recorder and later transcribed. Based on the final material, we have outlined those comments that, in the opinion of the research authors, most clearly expressed the opinions of the whole group.

Data Analysis

The transcribed material went through the stages of coding, categorization, and thematization, with six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87): 1. familiarizing with the data, 2. transcribing data, 3. reading the data, initial coding, searching for categories and themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining themes, and 6. writing the report.

The procedure for analyzing the transcribed data (phases 3, 4 and 5) was as follows: a. one researcher (the first author of the paper) coded the data after several repeated readings, b. the transcribed material was read by the other authors and the codes were recognized according to the resulting code grid. c. Discussions were organized during which the initial codes were slightly corrected to the agreement of the researchers, and themes were determined as well as categories.

The results are presented according to themes. We have outlined three themes: (non) adjustment to the research quality assessment, quantitative and/or qualitative assessment, and specificities in research and publication in SS&Hs.

Research Sample

The study was realized based on the participation of 25 respondents employed in four units of the University of Montenegro: The Faculty of Economics, Philosophy, Philology, and the Faculty of Sport. Respondents were three full professors, seven associate professors, nine assistant professors, three PhD teaching assistants, and three PhD candidates. In the text afterward, respondents are labeled with the letter R and an ordinal number. In this way, the participants were anonymized.

The reasoning behind selecting these faculty units rely on the theoretical part of the study – we choose those SS&Hs that are more similar to science fields in their research methodologies (economics and sport science) and those that do not have so good ISI coverage (philosophy, and philology). Besides, we opted for different experiences and selected different roles (from PhD candidates to full professors). It is realistic to assume that the academic career stage strongly influences the researchers' perception.

Ethics

Before the focus group interviews, the participants were thoroughly acquainted with the topic, and their research participation was voluntary. The research authors

contacted the participants directly and explained the topic to them. All the invited participants responded to the survey, emphasizing their interest.

The anonymity of the respondents was guaranteed when they were invited to participate. Then, the same information was repeated at the beginning of each interview, when the researchers asked for verbal permission to record the interview with a voice recorder. To avoid possible recognition of respondents' answers (the four faculty units that are covered are unequal in terms of the number of employees in all categories), in this paper, in certain isolated comments, only the number of respondents (1–25) is written with the mark R (respondent), without the characteristics of the academic title or faculty from which the respondent comes.

Reliability and Validity

The validity of the research was achieved by the independent opinions of the authors of the work and the respondents' opinions of the final research report. The reliability was achieved through five independent group interviews with participants from four faculties.

The chosen methodology has biases and limitations, among other things, because the focus group interviews included fewer respondents. Their diversity mitigates the limitation of the small number of respondents - different academic titles and different faculties. In addition, the interviews were semi-structured, which gave respondents much more freedom in answering the questions. This problem was solved by having the researchers read the transcribed material several times to identify themes.

Results

The respondents (25 of them) were grouped into five focus groups. It has already been mentioned that we leave out the more complete designations of the respondents (faculty and academic title) for anonymization. Where relevant - for example, for a range of responses - we provide such data at the focus group level. All mentioned comments are listed as direct quotes from respondents. We marked the respondents with the letter R (respondent), and next to the letter is the ordinal number of the respondents. Respondents 1-5 are from the Faculty of Philosophy and Philology (first focus group), same as 6-9 (second focus group), 10-15 from the Faculty of Economics (third focus group), 16-19 from the Faculty of Sports (fourth focus group) and 20-25 from the Faculty of Economics, Philosophy and Philology (fifth focus group). Such a combination was almost necessary because providing a time and place that suited all the invited participants is quite complex.

(Non) adjustment in the assessment of the research quality

The initial questions in the focus group interviews aimed at assessing colleagues' (lack of) agreement on evaluating research work. All respondents commented on this, as well as every subsequent question. Their perceptions are quite different. After repeated readings of their comments, we determined four categories of answers. Therefore, the categories were not given in advance, but we arrived at them from the respondents' answers and comments.

The opinions of the (non) agreement can be grouped into four categories:

1. Consent does not exist: "There is no such thing, and in my estimation, the reform tendencies are more in the direction of some marketing and formal presentation of science" (R4); "Some colleagues believe in highly rated journals evaluation, while some of them are more for qualitative evaluation." (R20); "The

work can be bad, but if it is published in a journal that the university values, it will be assessed as a good one" (R24).

2. According to some respondents ' opinions, it is not familiar that there is agreement; it is not known what quality is. They said: "We are caught by the criteria from 'above', which come to us as a mold for a dough – *Criteria* are like a mold, and we are a dough" (R7); "We do not have serious debates" (R22); "We are surprised because they do not estimate us qualitatively, but quantitatively" (R7); "We do not have a national list of scientific journals anymore. We only have marked 'space' where we are running to in an attempt to publish, and we are fighting to publish something that we think is scientific work." (R5).
3. The third focus group has a degree of agreement (R10–R15). Still, it is difficult to compare the work from different fields: "We can compare, and we have a high level of approval within a subcategory" (R11); "If you talk to a colleague from another department, there are differences that are sometimes extraordinarily large" (R10); "Now, we have a really good feeling for that, thanks to the fact that we are forced to write papers for the SSCI list. When someone writes for SSCI one time, (s)he cannot move to a lower level" (R13); "In the part of elementary methodological postulates, I think we have no differences" (R12).
4. There is agreement at the level of the category: "We can agree in our research field. The best quality works are published in the most prestigious journals" (R16); "The rules are very clear" (R17).

The third and fourth groups of answers were obtained from economics and sports science employees: areas considered to use methodologies used in the natural and technical sciences. Other categories of responses have been highlighted in the comments of researchers in the humanities and social sciences, such as sociology and the science of education. Most respondents still have dilemmas about the quality of research work and how it is assessed. Without special instructions from the examiners, all respondents linked the quality evaluation issue with publication in the databases and Clarivate Analytics journal list.

Since the respondents in the third focus group initially introduced the SSCI during the interview, they were asked: "Do you unconditionally believe in the SSCI?" The first reaction was common to the whole group. The respondents denied unconditional trust: "There are very high-quality papers in SCOPUS and other databases. It does not matter if the journal is on SSCI or not. Quality work is of high quality by itself" (R11); "The fact is that the SCI list is not a guarantor for the quality. However, some methodological requests in the indexed journals, in terms of a form – which is very similar from journal to journal – I believe that that template is obligatory for researchers and that its function is a better quality of work" (R12); "It makes us read 200 research papers to write a research question or hypothesis. Those papers we wrote earlier were not exactly like that" (R13); "You have complete theoretical papers at the SSCI - like interviews - which surprised me. But still, that work has quality" (R14) (As part of tacit knowledge, the connection of "good" work with the quantitative methodology is noticed.); "I do not have preferences for SCOPUS or the SSCI list, but I have found more concrete results in some SCOPUS journals – they better responded to the defined goal and asked question. On the other hand, I saw some papers on the SSCI list - everything is good and packaged in the form, but if you would ask me: *What did these guys do?* I could not say" (R15).

The second issue aimed at determining the respondents' awareness of how the research work is evaluated in related institutions. Familiarity with the topic plays an important role in the objectivity and completeness of perception. A few respondents

(three) said they were unfamiliar with it. In the third focus group, which had the representative comment: "We are harmonized, and that can be seen from a large number of our joint works" (R13), other respondents had different comments: "In Slovenia, they have a consensus among themselves and rules that do not imply this SSCI 'madness'" (R3); "Everyone has objections to the Criteria. I had the opportunity to hear about it in Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia. The university system has become business - and science, and criteria, and I think it is not easy for anyone" (R1); "There are differences, for sure. In conversation with colleagues, we have concluded that they have kept a lot of the old system, in the sense that there are chambers, conferences, and reviewers, which are a key link in determining the quality of work, and, of course, there are councils of social sciences that have a greater role concerning senates" (R8); "We are in a worse situation than all of them. Why? For example, there is a national journal list in Croatia in Serbia. In Montenegro, no list of journals is recognized as relevant, so..." (R9).

The question of academic promotion procedures was raised among the respondents. Their information is directly related to such procedures in the surrounding countries. With a general assessment that the demands are increasing everywhere, respondents point out that the University of Montenegro is more demanding concerning related institutions in the surrounding countries, which may be a subjective perception. Nevertheless, a national journals list is often mentioned (it exists in other countries) as something that is missing in Montenegro.

Some respondents had concrete examples in which they highlighted the unscientific social environment and, partly, the political flows that have a crucial impact on work assessment, which is in favor of unclear quality assessments. It is a suggestion for a series of potentially relevant factors that can influence the publication of the research. Specifically, the work that received positive reviews was not published for unknown reasons: "I sent a paper to a regional journal. What happened? The work was praised, and two excellent reviews were written, but the editor declined to publish the work for 'his' reasons. What does that testify to? It testifies that the quality of work is not considered. In the linguistic and political situation in which we are now, some other factors are much more important" (R6).

Other participants also responded to this example, referring to similar situations in which the works were rejected because they did not coincide with the language, political, or other directions represented by the journal editors. Such comments and examples are credible for SS&Hs, whose important characteristic should be criticism. If the criticism is directed towards an (in)appropriate direction that strongly influences the fate of the work: "The work that does not suit the official political picture will not be published. This problem is not just in the region" (R7). Respondents agreed: "I do not think such agreement exists in the region or beyond. It is not always a rule that the quality of work directly impacts its publication. Let us compare some of the works published in well-ranked environmental journals and compare them with some rejected papers. One can see disagreement - it seems that some of the rejected papers are better than some of the published ones" (R16) or "We have reviewed many works in the SSCI list and encountered an uneven quality" (R24).

The question of how valuable the quality of research in the region is and beyond is further related to purely economic factors: "The whole list, which we have to respect in the style of Publish or Perish, is like a company, a corporation, it is a private business that determines purely quantitatively what is good and what is bad. There are no stories about quality; there are no places for SS&Hs because there is no place for them if there is no profit" (R7). Other participants support this comment.

Regarding agreement at the university level, all respondents point out that there is no harmonization: "We often have disproportionate needs - someone needs equipment, some instruments, lawyers, historians... all have their own needs. There are many disagreements" (R16). Formal compliance was established at the University of Montenegro through the *Criteria* and their interpretation by the competent authorities – primarily the Scientific Committee and the Senate of the University, but there is no real agreement: "Formal synchronization exists. We are moving more and more towards having fewer and fewer possibilities for (mis)interpretation of the rules" (R1). However, what is the common attitude of the respondents? "I think the sanction part is prevalent. This second, motivational, incentive is less expressed – although there are some new steps" (R21); "We do not have, and we should have our vision" (R9). Comments from natural and technical sciences colleagues who apply estimates derived from their research fields were numerous. Respondents especially point out that it is unclear to them how experts in one area give themselves the right to comment on works and achievements in other areas: Agreement was not expressed for several years, two or three, in some transitional period, of the criteria for ranking. We had a situation - it is not good if it is not on the SSCI list. That was the attitude of colleagues from other organizational units, both natural and technical. Although maybe they were not competent to evaluate the work themselves, they had an immediate defense - if the work is in SCOPUS or ... and not in the SCI, they immediately think that the work is not good" (R15). A comment caused special acclaim: "There are differences that were not considered. This should be considered when evaluating our work" (R16).

Quantitative and/or qualitative assessment?

All respondents agreed that both types of assessment are possible, necessary, and vital, and "I think it is a mistake not to consider the reviewers' opinions. Many are high-quality workers in some segments –teaching, professional work, etc., but they may not have their papers in top-level journals" (R16). In addition, they point out that SS&HS needs to include various activities and their results in the evaluation: conferences, monographs, textbooks, professional activities, etc. Such an opinion is pointed out: "From all aspects, one should analyze one's work. It is a real problem taking only one parameter. It is necessary to have a spread out indicator system" (R3). Let us say, "We have a colleague who has ten books. If he had applied for promotion now, he would not be promoted because he does not have articles in SSCI" (R13). Respondents believe it is necessary to recognize the specifications for SS&Hs and that a qualitative assessment, "reading the work by the reviewer" (R9), has a special significance. The respondent points out that "the indicators should be redefined, and then the criteria will be respected" (R12). In all groups, the opinion is that quantitative assessment is insufficient, as suggested by other studies (Ochsner et al., 2014). It is necessary to have a qualitative assessment, whereby it is crucial to develop a set of indicators, which would also improve peer review (Lamont, 2009).

With this issue, the respondents directly related the question of reviewing, with their experiences being completely different, ranging from trust to distrust in qualitative assessment: "Reviews can be subjective. It is difficult for a man to isolate subjectivity. It is recognized throughout the community that for some leading authors, it is easier to publish than for anonymous ones. That is subjectivity" (R21). We point out the metaphorical comment aimed at creating a quality assessment matrix: "It is necessary to do something like in gymnastics – to assess both the acrobatic part and the aesthetics" (R17).

Specificity in research and publishing in SS&Hs

Qualitative vs. quantitative research. The relationship between the two paradigms is often associated with the possibility of publishing papers in a good journal, so the main belief is that quantitative research is assessed as better. Qualitative research is interpretative-analytical, explicitly mentioned: "We are dealing with phenomena, and there has to be an interpretive paradigm" (R1). Quantitative research is related to empirical data collection and its statistical processing. Both studies have important relevance to SS&Hs, but their evaluation is not always synchronized, so sometimes "faith in the number" prevails over the abovementioned interpretative part: "There is a tendency to force for quantification more than we want" (R1); "In psychology, we measure everything now, although it is not necessary" (R4).

Respondents in all groups are convinced that both studies are important and that the research paradigm should be chosen according to the topic and goals. However, they consider that "In these journals that are in the databases only the quantitative ones have an advantage" (R8), but "The authenticity of humanities is based on valuable evaluation, and this cannot be quantified" (R5); "We have in linguistics some journals that offer quantitative analysis, but without a critical review, without any comments, without any essential insight" (R6). Economists have the impression that exclusively quantitative research has the chance to be published in top journals. They point out that their attention has been drawn to it (R11) and that "Economics is familiar with the quantitative approach. More or less we are all able to get something through some statistics" (R12). Our collocutors think it is a pity if (almost) all the sciences keep or achieve this methodological quantification course.

Team/individual work. Starting from the thesis that in advance, it is difficult to say whether the best results are given in individual or team research, this question was asked, bearing in mind that we will partially illuminate the respondents' experiences through answers. The focus groups were not homogeneous: respondents from the Faculty of Philosophy highly value teamwork, but they believe that how it is currently being realized is ethically questionable. Economists are focused on teamwork and evaluate it as a necessity by offering examples and arguments for it: "What an independent author – it is meaningless" (R14) or "In the last years, I used to download one or two works almost every day, and I did not read one that had been written by one author" (R15). Researchers in sports are focused on teamwork: "We are networking for every research study. It is much easier and much more effective" (R18). The work functions so that "we always work in teams, three to four members, sometimes also six to seven, depending on what we do. We all have tasks. We split up, for example, by defined variables. When we write, everyone writes a part" (R19), and, in addition, "We often do comparative analyses with colleagues from other countries" (R17).

Representatives of the humanities, however, have different opinions, as well as significantly poorer experience with teamwork. One respondent has no experience working in the team: "It seems that there are topics – or I have dealt with such topics – where I am not sure that it would work out in the team" (R6). Philologists think big teams (more than two or three people) cannot function in their research field, except with large corpora (R8). Small teams are considered possible and useful, primarily concerning different insights into the topic, especially if interdisciplinarity (R5) is achieved, which is highly valued by all respondents. Respondents who have experienced teamwork point out the benefits: "It is the greatest benefit for the development of my scientific research because one person can learn something from a colleague. I have no experience with how this would look if three people were

involved, but in a team of two, it is great" (R5). All respondents believe that interdisciplinarity is the future of science (R16).

One element of the hidden form of cooperation appeared during the discussion on this issue. Namely, the respondent pointed out: "I am absolutely for teamwork, but it does not prevail. I do not like the teamwork we are dealing with, 'add a colleague to be part of the work.' Such teamwork does not make sense" (R2). In this group, a consensus has been reached that there is no future without teamwork, but they do not see that this work functions as it should.

The demand for research to be published in international journals, usually in English, encourages dialogue on the possibility of internationalizing research results. Naturally, journals at the other end of the planet are not interested in research concerning mainly Montenegro. They are interested in different subjects, those that are globally important or those that correspond to their social reality. "I have to change the focus to be interesting for international journals. I am dealing with the relations between Montenegro and Italy. If I mention Italy in my work more than Montenegro, then there is a chance that I will attract some international publishers" (R9). To some researchers, this works counterproductively, and they are not motivated to work (R8). In addition, social scientists consider how the *Criteria* treat conferences as extremely adverse due to the possibility of international exchange of experiences.

During the interviews, it was pointed out that researchers from the smaller communities are now almost forced to use data from another system and that the problem is, for example, the size of the sample for quantitative analysis that can be obtained in Montenegro (R11) or even in the Balkans (R14). That is why "There was an absurd situation that scholars from Montenegro analyzed public debt in Germany" (R15). There are big differences in the perception of the internationalization of research results. There are extreme opinions, from "I wrote about the Durmitor dialect. Who cares? Nobody! It is very interesting for linguists, but not for others" (R2) to "We can do it - man is man, here and in America" (R17).

Another important component that is highlighted regards the choice of the topic for research; if one wants to publish work in indexed journals, one must start from the interest of these journals and not from the needs of Montenegrin society and science: "There are no journals from Russia on this one journal list, from Poland, after all - from Montenegro. How will anyone dealing with our language be interested... Three or five journals may deal with politics; they are interdisciplinary. They want to be quoted. To be quoted, the topic must be current" (R7). The other collocutors are fully in agreement and have similar experiences.

The third factor must be considered a type of discrimination: "Not to speak of the 'ić' question. If John Smith sends the work, he has a 30% better chance to publish than Petar Petrović, Marko Marković [...] There is a blog made by an African scientist. He describes his experience and the experiences of other people who do not have this Anglo-Saxon name and surname. We can joke about it and be angry, but it is just like that" (R7).

Discussion and Conclusions

Summary of the research

Our research aim was to describe the perception of the quality assessment of research work in the SS&Hs at the University of Montenegro. We opted for a qualitative methodology with a focus-groups technique. A total of 25 respondents from four SS&H research fields were included as the study participants.

Focus groups are led nondirective, meaning interviewees are free to elaborate on the topic in the way they think they need to and how they encourage each other. This was done to keep the focus on perception and to obtain the basic ideas that appear to the researchers concerning this topic. All invited researchers were involved in research, which was not the case in some similar analyses (Giménez-Toledo et al., 2013; Ochsner et al., 2016).

The reported results show the richness and complexity of the topic, which suggests different perceptions of researchers and their diverse experiences. The agreement regarding the assessment of the quality of the research has not been established to the necessary extent. The direct and practical association in assessing the research quality for all our examinees was the publication in the journals from SSCI and A&HCI lists. Humanities researchers have shown that evaluation through these lists is not clear enough for them and is unfamiliar. Some social sciences (economics, sports sciences) quickly adapted to publishing requirements in the Clarivate Analytics databases, while other social sciences and all the humanities are still far from such indicators. Even "customized" social sciences do not reliably evaluate the quality of works published in the abovementioned databases, i.e., WoS's journals are not synonyms for quality for our respondents. Following the nonlinear nature of building up knowledge in these sciences, researchers believe that "good work" can be evaluated almost independently from the journal or the publisher; it can be indexed in Scopus or some other indexing service.

Respondents have different views on how the quality of research is assessed in our region and beyond. Still, some of them express the belief that the demands of the University of Montenegro are very high. Lack of reliable information can be one of the factors that hinder researchers. Regarding compliance at the university level, it is suggested that researchers in natural and technical sciences have prevailed in assessing the quality of research in SS&Hs. Some groups of social scientists have accepted this, believing that quality evaluation could consider the specificity of different sciences.

The question of qualitatively vs. quantitative quality assessment of research work for our respondents is not either/or. In this section, they agree both evaluations are necessary. In doing so, linear progress (through impact factors, for example) does not correspond to the SS&Hs. For these sciences, a more complex matrix or matrices should be developed. The respondents emphasized positive and negative opinions on the review of their work and their assessment indicator. They were positive about reading the paper during the peer review process. Still, many negative factors can accompany this process, whereby subjectivity is a common denominator. As for the indicator assessment, the general state is insufficient.

Factors that are directly related to the current dominant indicator methods of evaluating work, such as the number of papers, rank of the journal list, or impact factor, are directly related to methodological paradigms (qualitative vs. quantitative), research practices (individual or teamwork), but also the possibilities of internationalizing research results. All these factors differ among scientific areas, showing that social sciences are more successful in designing and implementing quantitative team research with more general topics.

Theoretical implications

According to our respondents ' perception, research shows that SS&Hs are in many ways different from the natural sciences and that the same quality assessment indicators do not match them. This data corresponds to our theoretical framework

(Brooks, 2005; Hicks et al., 2015; Ochsner et al., 2012, 2013, 2014; Perić et al., 2013). Namely, differences in research methodologies and practices between scientific fields should be considered in any research assessment. Our respondents discussed mostly publication practices (emphasizing the WoS's journals), and the reason behind their perceptions could be found in the Criteria for academic and scientific promotion(2016).

It is also clear that the qualitative assessment alone is insufficient, as many reasons point to subjectivity, even in an informed peer review. Our results have confirmed this situation: Our respondents in the field of several SS&Hs have spoken about so many dilemmas, challenges, and experiences, which support the common, most important conclusion, namely that the evaluation of the quality of scientific research in SS&Hs must be both qualitative (based on informed peer review) and quantitative (based on indicators derived from the very nature of these investigations). This data follows previous research (Ochsner et al., 2012, 2013, 2014; Perić et al., 2013), notwithstanding our respondents were not skilled with scientometrics terminology.

Managerial Implications

As important factors in defining the quality assessment matrix and specific indicators, but also in improving the peer review, we highlight the following implications from this research.

First, the internal agreement in the perception of quality evaluation is higher in those areas that rely more on statistics. This does not mean, however, that all sciences should be directed toward statistics to increase consensus. To increase the internal consensus in the quality assessment, it is necessary to identify clear, precise, unambiguous indicators that will also show the specificity of SS&Hs. An agreement on what quality of research in SS&Hs can be achieved through the three necessary processes: 1. through research that will involve most of the population of researchers (in this case, on the University of Montenegro), 2. good theoretical link to quality issues, and 3. comparative studies.

The indicator part should not be one-sided, i.e., as a criterion of quality of work, it is not sufficient to use one measure: works in one basis of a journal, works from one category, or the impact factor. The specific characteristics of SS&Hs are not just something our respondents discuss. On the contrary, they are a global feature of these sciences and should be considered.

Along with creating the mentioned matrix, it would be necessary to develop some discussion and exchange of ideas among researchers. Our respondents' experiences are different, and exchanging these experiences could positively affect the overall working atmosphere. Through research, for example, we have observed that the experience for some researchers in teamwork is very frustrating, while other researchers have clear procedures for teamwork. In the modern world, science is rarely an individual question; the phenomenon's complexity stimulates the work of teams, and, in this respect, it develops interdisciplinary.

Limitations of the paper

This paper has limitations. Most constraints are from the methodology used, which did not include all the significant issues and open topics, nor did we include a significantly larger number of respondents, which should be done in future research. Our focus groups were exclusively composed of the researchers of SS&Hs: in future research, it would be useful to provide discussion in groups of completely heterogeneous composition. This would lead to the deepening of the topic and its better understanding by the participants.

Future Studies and Recommendations

According to our data, indicators are needed, but which indicators should be chosen is the issue that has to be addressed in future research, which should include a significant part of the population of social and humanistic researchers at the University of Montenegro. Quality indicators are not easy to harmonize, which is well documented by a focused series of research studies (Ochsner et al., 2016), meaning that some future studies should focus on finding objective qualitative indicators. Besides, future studies in research evaluation in the SS&Hs in the Montenegrin context could address questions such as publication practices (journal vs. monograph), team vs. individual research, and experiences with international journals.

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About the authors

Dijana Vučković holds a Ph.D. in Didactics and Teaching Methodology from the University of Belgrade. She is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy. Her interests in research include the reception of literature by young readers, reading literacy, reading with understanding, general teaching methodology, methodology of teaching mother tongue and literature, teaching initial reading and writing skills, literacies, and key competencies (e.g. communication, civic competence, learning to learn, cultural awareness), teaching methods, learning strategies, curriculum development, academic integrity etc. On these topics, she has presented studies at national and international scientific conferences, which have been published in international journals She is the UNESCO chairholder at the University of Montenegro. The authoress can be contacted at **dijanav@ucg.ac.me**.

Sanja Pekovic holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Paris-EST. She is a Full Professor at the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management and the Vice-Rector for Internationalization at the University of Montenegro. Between 2006 and 2011, she was a Researcher at the Center for Labor Studies (Centre d'Eudes de l'Emploi) and Lecturer at the University Paris-EST. Her research interests are quality and environmental economics, the economics of innovation, and applied econometrics. On this topic, she has presented studies at national and international scientific congresses, which have been published in international journals. Dr. Pekovic was a visiting scholar at the INRASupArgo (Montpellier), at the University of Montenegro (Podgorica), at the Laboratoire CNRS UMI 2615 Franco-Russe PONCELET (Moscow), and at the Institute of Environment, UCLA (Los Angeles), etc. The author can be contacted at **psanja@ucg.ac.me**.

Stevo Popovic has 10+ years of experience focusing on planning, conducting, and evaluating research studies dealing with health and exercise, including clinical trials. As a sports and exercise scientist, he uses knowledge of how the body works to help people improve their health and sporting ability. However, he also has profound insight into physical anthropology, and he understands the complexity of how physical activity affects the human body and its composition, but also into social anthropology, which helps to understand the social side of the same issues. With a background as a Ph.D. from the University of Novi Sad and postdoc from the University of Ljubljana, as well as a teacher and researcher at the University of Montenegro, he has achieved the following key competencies: knowledge of teaching and the ability to design courses, project and data management, study design expertise, excellent communication skills, and dissemination skills in both written and oral etc. He currently holds several leading positions in national and international projects and leading roles and memberships in the governing bodies of professional and scientific organisations. The author can be contacted at **stevo.popovic@ucg.ac.me**.

Jovana Janinovic is a teaching assistant at Faculty of tourism and hotel management, University of Montenegro. She holds a PhD (2023) from University of Valladolid and University of Pavol Jozef Safarik in Kosice in the area of heritage tourism management. She conducted fellowships at University of Bielefeld (2017), University of Leipzig (2017), University of Paris-Est (2018) and Slovak Academy of Science (2019). She holds Masters in European studies from EHESS Paris and Charles University Prague, as well as a Masters in Economics from University of Nice. Her research interests include sustainable heritage management, the sociology of tourism, memory studies, entrepreneurship, urban development, academic integrity. The author can be contacted at **jovanav@ac.me**.