

The role of books in Croatian research evaluation procedures: the example of a widening country

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ABSTRACT

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Books are an important part of the scholarly ecosystem for SSH scholars and will probably remain the essential medium for the dissemination of new research in the foreseeable future. As such, they should be considered properly in research evaluation, which demands specific knowledge on the publication patterns in SSH disciplines, as well as on the book publishing ecosystem and editorial practices.

Scholarly publications patterns are intrinsically linked to the nature of the fields (prevalence of a certain communication channel, but also cultural and historical context of a country), and are also influenced by different external factors, such as sustainability of book publishing (especially in the era of transformation from print to digital), as well as evaluation policies (that could create negative incentives for book publishing). One of the most important factors that influences researchers' publication performance is a research evaluation system, since researchers inevitably need to adapt their scholarly activities to the professional advancement requirements.

COST Action ENRESSH made an inventory of a great number of national research evaluation systems in Europe. Although SSH publication patterns differ across Europe,

books were specified as the type of SSH scholarly output taken into consideration in most evaluation procedures. However, a deeper analysis is required to trace their implementation in the assessment of research performance, as pointed out in several studies performed by researchers from ENRESSH. One of the analysed systems was the Croatian research evaluation system, which will be described below. It could serve as an illustration of how evaluation of books in SSH is implemented in the research assessment in an EU member state classified as a widening country within Horizon Europe.

Evaluation procedures in Croatia are based on the informed peer review and are adapted to the SSH publishing practises to a certain extent, although science policies put a lot less emphasis on books than on journal articles.

Career promotion system is predominantly discipline specific and as such takes into consideration publication patterns in various SSH disciplines. However, it is a purely quantitative system which is based almost exclusively on the scientific output, i. e. number of peer-reviewed publications. In the assessment of researchers in the social sciences, books and book chapters are permitted outputs that are evaluated based on their indexing in WoS and Scopus databases, and the publishers' reputation or prestige (internationally renowned academic publishers; university presses or other national and international academically renowned publishers; other publishers). One book is considered equivalent to three papers (in their respective category), and a book chapter to one paper (also in its respective category). In humanities, publishing authored books is the requirement for obtaining senior research positions. The scholarly value of a book is evaluated based on pre-publication and post-publication reviews, as well as on the additional assessment of the evaluation panel. Dictionaries, grammars and editorial books (including proceedings) are also included in the outputs considered. Specific requirements are further elaborated within different SSH disciplines.

Scientific titles obtained by evaluation procedure described above are precondition for the employment at public research institutes, as well as for obtaining teaching and academic positions at university units (which additionally mandates the authorship of academic books, textbooks and handbooks).

As for the national research project funding, the evaluation of the SSH project proposals includes the assessment of principal investigators and collaborators productivity (including peer-reviewed books and book chapters) and projects output potential. The outputs include monographs, book chapters, encyclopaedic and lexicon entries etc. Furthermore, applicants must specify book publishers.

Accreditation and re-accreditation of higher education institutions, public research institutes and other research organisations acknowledges that monographs/books have a key role in the field of SSH, and as such carry the same weight as the papers published in scientific journals. Therefore, the number of peer-reviewed monographs/books (published abroad or in Croatia), book chapters in peer-reviewed books and edited books are taken into account in the evaluation of SSH institutions.

As can be noticed from the examples described above, the evaluation of individuals in the social sciences considers books and book chapters indexed in WoS or Scopus as the most prominent output (along with the books published by internationally renowned academic publishers), even though these commercial databases have a limited coverage of scholarly SSH publications from non-English speaking countries. The appropriate coverage of the databases should be crucial if they are to be used in evaluation processes; nationally oriented publishers, which are highly relevant for scholars in the SSH, are mainly present in non-commercial databases. Likewise, the reputation or the prestige of a publisher plays an important role in the assessment of books, which implies the domination of publishers that have international profiles, and the inferior position of small national publishers. National publishers are to be considered properly in research evaluation processes in the SSH, as they enable publishing of a diversity of content and genres in national languages, which is essential for SSH scholars. There is no pre-defined rated list of the most relevant scholarly book publishers in the social sciences (nor in humanities) in Croatia, so it is up to the evaluation panels to assess book's scholarly contribution and the reputation of the publisher. It is a complex and challenging task, as there are no standardized procedures to identify publishers' relevance.

On the other hand, researchers in humanities are more immersed in the national publication context so they predominantly publish books with Croatian small and

medium-sized publishers, to which credibility is assigned mainly based on the state subsidies. The longstanding tradition of state subsidies for scientific book publishing has a key role in the scholarly publishing landscape in Croatia (on average more than 60% of subsidies goes to the books in humanities).

Clearly, scholarly books are very important for SSH, but the attention in the evaluation procedures should be given to the diversity in research output (bibliodiversity in terms of publication formats). Scientists have the inherent drive to produce knowledge that would be recognised and useful, not only within the academic community, but that would matter for the society. However, usually not all relevant forms of outputs are rewarded adequately in evaluation systems, including genres of books used for the societal interaction. Some Croatian evaluation procedures take into consideration professional publications (mostly textbooks and handbooks), or publication genres that are discipline specific (for example, dictionaries in philology, exhibition catalogues in art history). Nevertheless, although vaguely defined in regulations, dissemination and popularisation activities (including publishing professional and reference books) have been very well embedded in the Croatian SSH community. As one of the prominent examples of this practice is the very existence of the Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography, a publishing house and a scientific institution, which is defined in a governmental act as a “public institution of relevance for the Republic of Croatia”. With the mission to systematise and disseminate scientifically verified knowledge in the broadest span of scientific disciplines, its publications (encyclopaedias, encyclopaedic monographs, lexicons, dictionaries etc.), targeted for a broader audience, as well as for specialists, have been produced in collaboration with numerous high-profile researchers from academia since 1950. Yet, paradoxically, they are not taken into consideration as the relevant scholarly output in the research assessment (but eventually as the additional dissemination output), so there is an increasing lack of incentive to collaborate on such projects. In addition, it is worth mentioning that a great number of Institute’s editions are available in open access (OA), which surely contributes to their increased visibility (more than 16 million pageviews in 2021) and hence the potential for creating the societal impact.

Even though Croatia does not yet have a national OA policy in place, OA has been on the agenda for many years, so there is a considerable number of ongoing initiatives in

this area. However, there are no dedicated OA publishing schemes for books. Several small-scale university presses are faced with many challenges in their endeavour to move towards OA publishing. Within state subsidies for book publishing, both print and e-books are subsidised; until 2019 on average less than 1% of subsidies were allocated to e-books (OA is not the requirement). Croatia is not an isolated case. In many countries there is a lack of national policies for supporting OA publishing, hence OA book funding remains a rarity.

As for the scientific evaluation, OA in Croatia remains disconnected from the assessment procedures of individuals and institutions. National science foundation, which is in charge for research project funding, does not mandate OA, but OA publications can be funded through its programmes; the foundation allocates up to 100.000 HRK (cca 13.300 EUR) per project for open access costs, that is for publishing in top-tier journals, as well as for other types of scientific publications (monographs, edited books), published by renowned international publishers.

On the European level, however, there is an increasing pressure from funders to publish OA, even though it still represents a relatively small part of the book publishing landscape. If the trend in scholarly book publishing is toward OA, then policies for its support (development of digital infrastructure and sustainable business models), as well as for its appropriate implementation in the scientific evaluation procedures, should be adapted to recognise this trend.