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ERIH PLUS – MAKING THE SSH VISIBLE, SEARCHABLE AND AVAILABLE

Gry Ane Vikanes Lavik^{a*} and Gunnar Sivertsen^b

^agry.lavik@nsd.no

Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)
Harald Hårfagres gate 29, N-5007 Bergen, Norway

^bgunnar.sivertsen@nifu.no

Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU)
P.O. Box 2815 Tøyen, N-0608 Oslo, Norway

Abstract

The European Reference Index for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS) is a non-commercial initiative to increase the visibility of the humanities and the social sciences (SSH) by providing an international infrastructure for a comprehensive bibliographic coverage of the scholarly communication and publishing in these fields. A well-defined, standardized and dynamic register of scholarly journals and series is already up and running. Since a combination of national and international publishing is practised in the SSH, titles in all European languages are covered in ERIH PLUS if they correspond to six verifiable criteria. The register thereby challenges the commercial indexing services which tend to represent the SSH as “peripheral” to the sciences.

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* Gry Ane Vikanes Lavik. Tel :+47-55582583
E-mail address: gry.lavik@nsd.no

1. Purpose and relevance

The general aim of the European Reference Index for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS) project is to increase the visibility of the humanities and the social sciences (SSH) by providing an international infrastructure for a comprehensive bibliographic coverage of the scholarly communication and publishing in the fields.

The relevance of the ERIH PLUS project for Current Research Information Systems (CRIS) and for the euroCRIS organization is related to one of its more specific aims, which is to provide national and institutional CRIS systems with a well-defined, standardized and dynamic register of scholarly journals and series in the SSH. The register provides a basis for standardizing the bibliographic data and making them available and comparable across different CRIS systems.

An example of this type of application is the recommendation from the Technopolis Group to the Czech government in 2015 on the further development of the Czech national CRIS system RD&I IS. Arnold & Mahieu suggest¹:

enhancing the value of the RD&I IS for evaluation through the development of a standardized and dynamic register of scholarly journals, series and book publishers, similar to the ones developed in countries like Belgium (the Flanders) and Norway. This would be especially useful for SSH, combining for example the current List of peer-reviewed non-impact journals published in the Czech Republic with ERIH PLUS.

ERIH PLUS is a deliberate attempt to go beyond the commercial indexing services such as Web of Science and Scopus by covering more comprehensively all peer-reviewed scholarly journals in the SSH that are publishing at a minimum national level. Even with the latest expansions of the commercial databases, there is need for acknowledging journals of good quality in the SSH that are not yet covered².

The register presently covers around 7,500 journals and series in the SSH. It is dynamic and open to new journals at any time. Titles and identifiers are updated continuously against the international ISSN register. This standardization is required not only for the exchange and comparability of data between CRIS systems, but also for any measurement based on the data. Hence, the ERIH PLUS project has an extra relevance for CRIS2016 with its focus on communicating and measuring research responsibly. Our presentation of the ERIH PLUS project will be the first to occur at an international conference.

The ERIH PLUS project is implemented and further developed at: <https://dbh.nsd.uib.no/publiseringskanaler/erihplus/about/index>³

2. Background: From ERIH to ERIH PLUS

ERIH (the European Reference Index for the Humanities) was originally created and developed by European researchers under the coordination of the Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH) of the European Science Foundation (ESF). The ERIH lists, which initially mainly covered disciplines in the humanities, were first published by ESF in 2008, while revised lists were made available in 2011-2012.

In 2014, the responsibility for the maintenance and operation of ERIH was transferred to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), a non-commercial organization owned by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. NSD also runs the Norwegian Register of Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers as a resource for *CRIS*tin (the Current Research Information System in Norway).

The international register of journals and series at NSD is now called *ERIH PLUS* in order to indicate that it has been extended to *include the social sciences*. Two other changes, which will be explained below, have been made in collaboration with the SCH of the ESF:

1. Journals are not ranked any more (A, B, C). Instead, more objective criteria for inclusion have been established.
2. The register has become dynamic. Instead of having expert panels meet at large intervals, NSD is responsible for a daily operation and development of the register with the aid of National Experts and an international Advisory Group.

The classification of journals in categories A, B and C, all though used in some countries for the allocation of institutional funding, was one of the most controversial elements of the initial ERIH lists. The controversy rose from the notion that the inclusion and ranking of journals in some cases seemed arbitrary⁴. Another side that made the list open to criticism was that the ranking of journals was done within each discipline, which made journals operating across disciplines difficult to rank. More controversial though, was the fact that the ranking seemed to strengthen the focus and pressure towards publishing in the English-speaking world, while weakening publications in national languages. When the attention then was turned towards strengthening publications within national language groups, yet another concern was voiced, namely that there were cases of national journals of a poor quality that were ranked too high on the basis of a recommendation coming from only one committee member⁵. All in all the criticism against the initial lists were in some way or another connected to the system of ranking the journals.

To meet the criticism and to further develop ERIH PLUS in a more useful and maybe fruitful direction, several factors were changed when transferring ERIH to NSD. The criteria for inclusion, the review process and the categorization are now handled differently as ERIH PLUS is provided with a continuous inclusion of new journals.

3. Criteria for inclusion

The approval procedures of the ERIH PLUS database are, as mentioned, different from the original ESF procedures. There is no peer review by expert panels. Instead, all journal submissions are treated in a standardized way and reviewed for compliance with more objective criteria that can be checked against evidence. The new criteria have been developed jointly by ESF and NSD:

1. Explicit procedures for external peer review.
2. Academic editorial board, with members affiliated with universities or other independent research organizations.
3. Valid ISSN code, confirmed by the international ISSN register.
4. All original articles should be accompanied by abstracts in English and/or another international language relevant for the field.
5. Information about the affiliations and addresses of the authors should be published for each article.
6. Minimum national level: No more than two thirds of the authors published in the journal are from the same institution.

Criteria 1, 2, and 6, taken together, ensure that ERIH PLUS promotes research quality in the SSH. By allowing for journals published in the national languages, societal relevance is also promoted. Criteria 3-5, taken together, ensure that data will be efficiently relevant, searchable and comparable across Current Research Information Systems and other bibliographic data sources. They are also required for performing bibliometric analysis with the use of data from Current Research Information Systems⁶.

All six criteria must be assessed as fulfilled in order for a journal to be included in ERIH PLUS. When assessing that the journal complies with the criteria, only publicly available information is reviewed. It will not suffice that a scholar affiliated with the journal can give a description of how for example the peer review is conducted. If the peer review procedures are not published on the journals' web site or in the printed version, the criterion concerning peer review is regarded as not being fulfilled. Transparency is central in the ERIH PLUS project.

Transparency is believed to ensure truthfulness⁷. The ERIH PLUS transparency-requirement, must not however, be confused with requiring the journals to be open access (although ERIH PLUS can promote open access, see below). It is merely the information indicating that a journal complies with the criteria that has to be assessable, and not only for reviewers, but for all. The easiest way of enabling assessment of the criteria would be to demand that all information about the criteria must be available on-line. And in the first months of ERIH PLUS, this was indeed a requirement. However, while all journals do have a web site, it has become evident that far from all journals in the SSH have all information about for example authorship of the articles on-line. Therefore, when processing journals' applications for inclusion, on-line transparency is currently only advised for, not demanded. Journals are included also if documentation showing information about the criteria is given merely in the printed publication. Reviewing thousands of SSH journals have shown that on-line transparency has not yet fully dawned on the world of SSH publishing, all though the SSH seems to be moving in that direction. This point we shall return to in the section

“Preliminary effects and achievements” below.

4. Project organization

ERIH PLUS has a web site for on-line submissions at NSD, where journals are submitted continuously. The submissions may only come from scholars affiliated with universities and other independent research organizations. Journal editors, librarians and members of scholarly associations may submit if they meet this general requirement. Submissions from commercial publishers will not be considered. When submitting a journal, the scholar has to give information about title, ISSN, URL, language and publisher for the journal to be further evaluated.

Each individual journal is reviewed in a standardized way by reviewers looking for formal criteria. If needed, advice is sought from appointed National Experts. Being first and foremost a European index, ERIH PLUS has a National Expert representing every European country with more than 10 journals submitted for inclusion in the index. The experts are scholars who most often are affiliated with a university, and they have knowledge about and interest in scholarly publishing. The National Experts give guidance and advice in cases where the NSD reviewers are in doubt about a journal or a publisher. In addition to the National Experts, an international Advisory Group, also consisting of scholars, gives guidance about strategy and principal matters. The group represents different countries and fields in the SSH and has founders of the original ERIH project among its members.

When journals are reviewed by professional reviewers who can seek advice from appointed National Experts, this provides the project with control by the scholarly communities, while at the same time enabling a continuous flow of submissions and new inclusions to the register. The project organization is thus believed to be time and cost efficient and the standardization of the process might prevent cases of arbitrariness that the ERIH-list was criticized for as referred to above⁸.

The ERIH PLUS web site is also a place to find information about approved journals. A freshly updated list of all included journals with ISSN, country of publication and discipline can be downloaded at all times.

5. Preliminary effects and achievements

One effect of ERIH PLUS becoming a dynamic register with evidence-based criteria is as suggested above an increasing awareness about on-line transparency among researchers involved in SSH journals throughout Europe. This is particularly evident from the communication with the about 52 per cent of the submitted journals that were *not* approved after the first submission. In many of these cases, the journals actually did fulfil the criteria, but the information had not been made publicly available or was available only in the print version. Many of the journal editors have now decided to change their practice towards greater transparency about the journal's organization and content.

Those journals which were refused because they only had information about the editorial board, the peer review procedure and the authors of the articles in the printed version, have in many cases adopted a practice of indicating this information on the web site of the journal as well. These journals have been re-submitted for evaluation and approved for inclusion in ERIH PLUS. Other journals might have had information about editorial board and the peer review procedure as internal documents only. After being informed that the refusal was a result of their lack of practicing transparency, many of these journals are now practising on-line transparency. Based on this experience we can for a fact say that many European journals within SSH are now giving more detailed information about the editorial board, the peer review procedures, and about authors as well as abstracts in English on their web site, all in accordance with the ERIH PLUS criteria. Journal editors and staff have thus helped ERIH PLUS with the aims of making scholarly publications in the SSH more visible, searchable and available across Europe.

6. Future aims for ERIH PLUS

In 2010, a working group appointed by the European Science Foundation discussed the future of ERIH in the wider perspective of international research communication. They decided to include the social sciences in the perspective. Then they compared the SSH to science, technology and medicine and asked how the scholarly literature in the SSH could be made searchable and available across countries and languages in the same way. A link to the report is given in the references below⁹. On the basis of the report, the more specific aims for ERIH PLUS have been set as:

- Continue to challenge the limited coverage of the SSH in the commercial data sources.
- Become increasingly important as a resource for the running of CRIS-systems worldwide.
- Guide a more proper coverage of the SSH in performance-based funding systems.
- Become an agreed standard and resource in the development of a proper evaluation.
- Become an important information source for supporting research quality in OA journals.
- Develop from being a "list" to becoming an enriched information resource - through European collaboration.

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