

AHA Executive Committee

Ranking History Journals for Australian Universities

On 4 July 2016, the Executive Committee of the Australian Historical Association agreed to proceed with the ranking of academic journals publishing history research. The rankings are intended to assist in the evaluation at Australian universities of historians' research performance. In taking this decision, the Association recognised that journal rankings have become, for better or worse, an important part of the assessment of scholarly achievement in Australian universities. The Association's decision is a response to requests for a discipline-specific journal ranking coming both from the heads of history programs at Australian universities and from many of the Association's members.

The ranking of journals is controversial and the Association did not take this decision lightly. We are conscious above all that historians in Australian universities are currently disadvantaged in promotion, grant and job applications by the lack of rankings that take account of the discipline's professional standards and expectations for publications in history. If existing journal rankings are applied, historians are disadvantaged. Journal ranking is a proxy measure of the quality of articles that each journal publishes. It is imperfect as a quality measure because quality may take many forms and because all journals typically publish papers of differing quality. All journal rankings, including those that will be produced by the AHA, should therefore be used alongside other measures of quality.

The global journal ranking field is currently dominated by two citation-based measures, namely Thomson-Reuters' Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and RELX's Scimago Journal Ranking (SJR).¹ These rankings are inadequate for the humanities and much of the social sciences for the following reasons:

- SJR and JIF still offer very poor coverage of humanities and social science journals (variously estimated at only 10-40% coverage)
- They fail to account for citations of and in research monographs, which are a high-reputation form of publication in the humanities and social sciences
- They fail to account for the smaller research fields that are characteristic of humanities and qualitative social science, or for different citation practices in different fields
- They tend to use time frames (often two years) that are significantly shorter than the cited life of humanities and social science articles

The ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) ranking and the European ERIH (European Reference Index for the Humanities)², by contrast, gave comprehensive attention to humanities journals, but both rested primarily on the subjective judgement of influential scholars. Moreover, they each allocated a single rank to each journal, often to the disadvantage of journals that spanned more than one discipline. Both sets of rankings have now been abandoned. Nonetheless, although the Australian Research Council (ARC), which sponsored the 2010 ERA journal ranking, has insisted repeatedly that the ranking had no validity beyond the ERA process of that year and that it should not be used for other purposes, both individual scholars and institutions have continued to make extensive use of the 2010 list as proxy for the quality of specific journal articles.

¹ Google Scholar provides a ranking of the top twenty journals only in a range of fields. For the history ranking, see https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=top_venues&hl=en&vq=hum_history (accessed 15 July 2016).

² See <https://pastspeaks.com/2011/06/15/erih-rankings-of-history-journals/> (accessed 15 July 2016).

In proposing a methodology for ranking, the Association has developed a set of criteria that emphasise publication practices characteristic of the history discipline, while giving some recognition to both subjective judgements of standing and citation patterns. The proposed criteria are set out below and we now invite members of the Association to comment on them. After appropriate revisions, these criteria will be the basis for a ranking of journals which the Association plans to publish by the end of 2016.

Scope

This ranking covers journals in the broad field of history that are relevant to academic historians working in Australia. It includes both explicitly history journals and multi-disciplinary (especially area studies) journals with a substantial record of publishing history research. The list includes distinct sub-fields within history, including art history, military history and history of science. It does not include journals which seldom or never publish history articles. As a general rule, the ranking includes only journals that are currently recognized for the ERA with a Field of Research (FoR) code of 2103 (Historical Studies), 2202 (History and Philosophy of Specific Fields) or MD Multidisciplinary.

The ranking refers primarily to journal performance over the last ten years.

Journals listed in the AHA ranking may have a higher or lower ranking when viewed from the perspective of other disciplines. Journals not included in this list are unlikely to meet the standards of history as a discipline. Individual articles in journals not listed here, however, should preferably be judged for quality by peer review, rather than being dismissed.

Rankings refer to scholarly excellence, rather than social impact or engagement, which should be assessed separately.

The list retains the 2010 ERA labels of A*, A, B, and C, but discards the quota for each range, using instead a clear set of criteria for categorization.

The AHA emphasises again that this ranking offers only a proxy for judging the quality of journal articles and that it should be supplemented by other methods of assessment. In particular, we stress that history is a dynamic discipline. Articles published in a lower-ranked journal may prove to be influential pioneers in the development of new debates. If an article appears to be wrongly ranked because of the rank of the journal in which it appears, the problem is best addressed by a robust and transparent process of peer review.

Proposed criteria for ranking

The ranking of scholarly journals should be based as far as possible on verifiable criteria, but cannot entirely avoid subjective judgement. In ranking history journals, the AHA has employed the following criteria, roughly in descending order of importance:

- i. ***Focus on research.*** Top history journals publish articles based on original and fully cited historical research. They publish few or no condensed versions of other publications or articles without full referencing.
- ii. ***Range of authorship.*** Top history journals publish articles drawn from the global community of historians, rather than from a national or regional community or a particular interest group or network.
- iii. ***Breadth of content.*** Top history journals publish articles which address issues that are relevant across time and region, even though those articles are rooted in the specificity and empirical rigour that is the hallmark of history.

iv. **Career context.** Top history journals typically publish articles by authors with established publishing track records. Most authors will hold academic posts. Few authors will be PhD candidates or recent graduates.

v. **Reach.** Top history journals typically have a strong subscription base reflected in a high level of holdings in Worldcat.

vi. **Citation rate.** Articles in top history journals typically have a high Google Scholar citation rate over a ten-year period.

vii. **Editor and publisher.** Top history journals have an editor or editorial team comprising researchers who themselves have a strong academic reputation as evidenced by their employment history and publication record. Top history journals will be published by major journal publishing houses (Taylor & Francis, Carfax, Maney, Sage, RELX [Reed Elsevier]), university presses or well-established professional associations.

viii. **Production values.** Top history journals demonstrate high production values, including consistent referencing style, and high quality copy-editing and layout.

ix. **Rigorous selection.** Top history journals apply a rigorous selection process, in which referees provide high-level feedback, a significant proportion of articles are revised before acceptance and there is a high rejection rate.

x. **Standing.** Top history journals have high standing in the profession as premier publication venues for major analytical work. Evidence of standing may include the position and reputation of non-executive editors (e.g., members of editorial boards) and the journal's position in other rankings (including SJR and JIF).

Proposed categories

- A* Top journals. Rigorous refereeing process, high rejection rate of publication-standard submissions, attract publications by scholars who publish extensively in other outlets. Very low rate of multiple publication by the same author. Very high average citation rate (highly cited = >15). Generally eclectic across a wide range of topics (thematically, regionally) with a significant number of highly cited and field-transforming articles. Worldcat library holdings likely to exceed 1000.
- A High quality journals. Often peak journals in specific fields of history. Publish articles of wide interest within that field (thematic or regional) including a significant number of well-cited articles (well-cited = >8). Rigorous refereeing process. Worldcat library holdings likely to exceed 100 (may be smaller in smallish fields).
- B Respectable, serious journals. Academic editor(s). May publish articles for their intrinsic worth as detailed research, rather than for their likely impact on the broader field or their engagement with broader issues, hence low citation rates. All articles refereed but high acceptance rate of publication-standard submissions. Consistent referencing style; all articles copy-edited to professional standards. Worldcat library holdings likely to exceed 20.
- C In-house journals or journals associated with a particular institution or network, publishing a significant proportion of articles authored within the institution or network. Routinely publish articles referring only to published literature and/or

essays without full scholarly referencing. May have deficient production standards (inconsistent reference styles, poor copy-editing and layout). Editors may have weak publication records. Weak or uneven refereeing.

Process

The Association invites comments on this document, especially on the criteria for ranking. Please send comments to AHA executive officer by 12 August 2016. In line with the practice adopted by the Australian Council of Business Deans in ranking journals in Business Studies, any submission in response to this proposal or to the draft journal ranking will be made publically available at the completion of the review process.

The list as it stands can be viewed with the proviso that this is a preliminary working list only.

An AHA working party involving scholars from a range of specialist areas will then draw up a draft ranking which we plan to submit to members for comment on 1 October 2016, with comments due by 31 October.

The final list will be published by the end of the year. This list may be considered as current for the period until 31 December 2018. The Association intends to review the ranking, the methodology used and the scholarly consequences of its application in the second half of 2018.