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Leading thinkers attack Australian government's ERA Journal Rankings

Amid growing concern about the Federal Government's proposed ranking of journals and publishers under the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, 24 leading philosophers from around the world, including some of the most distinguished figures in the discipline, have issued a joint letter calling on the government to rethink the exercise, especially in relation to philosophy and the humanities.

The signatures include Gianni Vattimo, perhaps the pre-eminent figure in twentieth century Italian philosophy, Axel Honneth, one of the leaders in contemporary German thought, Slavoj Žižek, one of the most provocative thinkers and public intellectuals in Europe, Rosi Braidotti, one of the leading feminist thinkers of recent years, Hilary Putnam, one of the best-known figures in twentieth century analytic philosophy, top U.S Kant scholar Paul Guyer, Seyla Benhabib, one of the foremost contemporary social philosophers, along with other distinguished philosophers including several from Australia.

The letter reflects widespread condemnation of other similar ranking exercises from humanities academics around the world. Andrew Brennan, chair of philosophy at La Trobe University, and one of the organizers of the letter, explained that philosophy, like many other humanities subjects, was a rapidly-changing field that had spawned an enormous variety of journals, some of them with a very specialist focus. 'The launch of a new journal', he said, 'often marks an intellectually and culturally important innovation. But rankings of journal quality inevitably give top marks to the well-established, main line journals. If we are keen to identify creativity and innovation in the humanities, especially in Australia, it would be a mistake to put much weight on journal rankings'.

Jeff Malpas, professor of philosophy at the University of Tasmania, and co-organizer of the letter, pointed out that the sheer number and variety of philosophy journals made any straightforward ranking virtually impossible. 'Philosophy is not so much one discipline but rather a loose collection of many sub-disciplines' he said. 'It would be invidious to make comparisons of quality among people working in philosophy of law, education, architecture, psychology, politics, bioethics and history of ideas. These are just a few of the many specialist areas where philosophy has played a part in developing new ideas and approaches. And journals in English' he added, 'are just one fragment of world-wide philosophy publishing. English may be the international language of science, but it certainly does not have that status in philosophy, the humanities or the arts.'

In Europe, a similar ranking system for humanities journals was severely criticized by the British Academy in its report on peer review (see <http://www.britac.ac.uk/reports/peer-review/index.html>), while many professional bodies refused to cooperate in the ranking process. Professor Malpas commented that Australian humanities academics should also consider boycotting the process. 'The process has so far been carried out in an inept way,' he said, 'and if it continues to give priority to journals published only in English that would not only indicate a narrow-minded approach to judging research quality, but would mean that the whole idea of international benchmarking is not being taken seriously.'

Describing a related ranking of academic publishers as 'a quite unrealistic proposal', Professor Brennan expressed doubts about the bias against new ideas and innovation that seemed to be emerging not only from the Australian Research Council but also from the response of professional bodies in Australia. 'People are so excited about the idea of getting their favoured journals up to the top of the list that they seem to have forgotten about what makes research original', he said. 'For example, translation and commentary on works by philosophers who are not well-known – or who, because of their gender or nationality have been overlooked in the mainstream Anglo-American tradition – have been the hallmark of good quality work by younger scholars in Australia. Yet often the only outlet for such work has been a local specialist publisher, or a journal newly set up to encourage discussion and exchange of emerging ideas. The emphasis on the mainstream and well-established journals is actually a bias in favour of the conservative and traditional, not an encouragement of the innovative and original.' He added that he expected the criticism of the philosophy rankings to be echoed in many other areas in the Arts and Humanities.