

# Guidance on using metrics in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and other fields not usually conducive to bibliometric analyses

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## Overview

The [UCL bibliometrics policy](#) sets out some principles for the use of citation metrics in research assessment at UCL. As part of [the overall guidance](#), this paper sets out some general advice on appropriate ways to use citation metrics for publications in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and in other fields not usually conducive to bibliometric analyses.

Across the arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS), researchers tend to produce a greater diversity of research output types compared to the biological and physical sciences (where journal based outputs (e.g., articles, conference proceedings, reviews) are the primary method of publication). Similarly, there are some subfields in the biological and physical sciences that also use a wider range of outputs. Many of these outputs types are not readily indexed in databases at scale or have standardised citation practices. Hence, for many disciplines in the AHSS (and some subfields elsewhere) citation metrics have no or little significance and are rarely used, if at all.

There are, however, some fields in the AHSS, such as economics, where publishing practices are similar to that of the physical and biological sciences (e.g., journal articles), and in such fields citations are more commonly used.

This guidance document is intended for researchers and managers in fields that do not routinely use citation metrics. Those working in fields where publishing practice is conducive to citations should follow the guidance found throughout [UCL's bibliometrics webpages](#). Those working across fields or in central bodies with oversight over different AHSS (sub)fields should recognize the diversity of research outputs in these areas and assess research accordingly.

## Not imposing metrics where they are inappropriate

UCL's Bibliometrics policy is clear: in fields where citation metrics are not practiced, or are not meaningful, UCL will not impose their use. Similarly, the policy explicitly recognizes the diversity of research outputs and practice and that any assessment of research must reflect this, including not using metrics where they are not useful or accepted.

This should reassure those working in fields where metrics are not commonly used, so that they can generally continue to assess research as they do now in the absence of metrics. However, there remains a need to avoid some poor practice outlined in the more general principles of the policy, such as judging outputs on their intrinsic value, not external proxies (like the reputation of authors or book publishers).

## Issues with citation metrics in the AHSS

The existing citation databases are often built around publication practices in the biological and physical sciences. However, many fields in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and some sub-fields in other sciences differ from the majority of the physical and biological sciences in their heavy use of non-journal publications, including (but not limited to), books, book chapters, exhibitions, and performance media.

These types of publications are not well covered by the standard bibliographic databases (Scopus and Web of Science) – many books are not covered, while others have incomplete metadata or citation records – and so it is difficult to carry out meaningful analysis on them. These fields may also have a higher proportion of their journal articles in regional or non-English publications, which are also less well covered in citation databases.

Coverage of humanities material is better in Google Scholar, but this database has other problems and inaccuracies which make it unsuited for bibliometric analysis. The situation has improved somewhat in recent years, with coverage of monographs increasing, but at the moment any citation analysis for these fields should be done with a great deal of caution. Any conclusions that can be drawn are likely to only represent a sample of the relevant publications and may be very misleading. There is, as yet, no widely accepted good solution here.

### Alternative approaches

In fields such as economics or business studies, where the use of citation metrics is generally accepted, there should be no problem in using them within the bounds of UCL's policy discussed [elsewhere in this guidance](#).

For fields where they are not well established, or in the absence of comprehensive publication databases, narrative based methods may be an appropriate way to allow scholars to present their research. Nonetheless, some limited metrics are practical. For example, the measurement of publication numbers can be done using data from RPS, which is hopefully more comprehensive than the bibliographic databases as it will include a larger set of material, and this can be used to consider year-on-year changes.

In some fields, such as education, policy or practitioner impacts may be particularly significant. In these cases, using alternative metric approaches ([see guidance](#)) to identify work with substantial impact can be useful and appropriate, though these should only be used to highlight material for further investigation, and not used as quantitative metrics in their own right.