



The Architecture of Research Excellence: Publication, Collaboration, and Impact among French and Dutch ERC Scholars

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether differences in national research organization are reflected in the scholarly performance of European Research Council (ERC) grant recipients in the social sciences and humanities in France and the Netherlands. The comparison is framed around contrasting patterns of research governance and institutional organization, with particular attention to their possible influence on publication output, subject specialization, and collaborative activity. The study analyzes 9,996 publications produced by 305 ERC-funded researchers during 2019–2023, using data obtained from Scopus and SciVal. A combination of topic modeling through latent Dirichlet allocation, compound annual growth rate calculations, and co-authorship network analysis was applied to identify major disciplinary patterns and research relationships. The findings indicate strong activity in neuroscience, climate-related research, and psychology, while French researchers show greater prominence in language and linguistics and Dutch researchers demonstrate stronger representation in law and political science. Institutional affiliations also differ considerably between the two countries. French awardees are more frequently connected with national and specialized research organizations, whereas Dutch awardees are concentrated in leading universities. Collaboration appears closely associated with scholarly visibility, particularly when international partners are involved. Overall, the findings demonstrate that institutional settings and patterns of collaboration play an important role in shaping academic performance.

KEYWORDS: European Research Council; Scientometric Analysis; Research Governance; France; Netherlands; Scholarly Collaboration; Publication Performance.

INTRODUCTION

The academic community as one of the most prestigious and competitive funding mechanisms in Europe, the European Research Council (ERC) has been described as the “Champions League” of research [1,2]. Established in 2006, the ERC was created to support investigator-driven, high-risk, and frontier-oriented research conducted by outstanding scholars across Europe. Its central purpose has remained consistent: to strengthen scientific excellence, encourage original inquiry, and promote discoveries capable of advancing knowledge across disciplinary boundaries [3]. The initiative also emerged in response to concerns regarding Europe’s international research competitiveness, particularly in relation to uneven investment in research and development and limitations in research assessment practices across national systems [4].

The ERC was designed with an ambitious and broad mandate. It supports fundamental and pioneering research across scientific and technological fields, including the social

sciences and humanities, while creating a Europe-wide system of competition based primarily on scientific excellence [5]. By allocating grants through open competition, the ERC also seeks to stimulate greater investment in research and development. A defining feature of this model is its emphasis on the researcher and the originality of the proposed project rather than on large institutional consortia. This orientation gives particular importance to investigator-led, exploratory research and distinguishes the ERC from funding schemes primarily organized around predetermined applied or collaborative objectives [6].

The scale of the ERC’s funding activity illustrates its importance within the European research landscape. According to the ERC statistical dashboard available at the time of the original study, 16,029 projects had received support, representing total funding of approximately EUR 27.685 billion. The structure through which these resources are distributed is particularly important because the ERC has substantially altered the organization of research

funding in Europe and extended its influence beyond individual national systems. Eligibility is linked principally to conducting research at an institution located within the European Union or associated participating countries, allowing researchers of different nationalities to compete within a common framework [7,8].

A revised panel structure introduced in 2019 further organized ERC-funded research into three broad scientific domains: Social Sciences and Humanities (SH), Physical Sciences and Engineering (PE), and Life Sciences (LS) [9]. Each domain contains specialized panels intended to represent the diversity of contemporary research areas. This structure enables the ERC to evaluate proposals within appropriate disciplinary contexts while maintaining a common overarching principle of excellence.

The ERC currently operates through four principal funding schemes: Starting Grants, Consolidator Grants, Advanced Grants, and Synergy Grants [20]. Starting Grants are intended for researchers in the earlier stages of their independent careers, generally within two to seven years after completion of the PhD. These grants provide an opportunity to establish independent research agendas and develop research teams [10-16]. Consolidator Grants target researchers who have progressed beyond the initial postdoctoral stage and normally fall within the seven- to twelve-year period following their doctorate. Applicants are expected to demonstrate a strong scientific record together with the capacity to pursue an ambitious research program, making this scheme particularly relevant to researchers consolidating their academic independence [17-21].

Advanced Grants, by contrast, are directed toward established researchers with a substantial record of scientific achievement. Beyond supporting major individual research programs, such funding may create opportunities for researchers to broaden scholarly connections and develop new patterns of cooperation and co-authorship [68,20]. Synergy Grants occupy a distinct position within the ERC portfolio because they are explicitly intended for research questions that require close intellectual interaction among several principal investigators [22]. These grants support teams of two to four principal investigators undertaking problems that cannot reasonably be addressed by a single researcher or research group. At the time reflected in the cited funding framework, Synergy Grants could provide up to EUR 10 million over six years, with additional support available in specific circumstances for start-up requirements and major equipment [23].

The influence of the ERC extends well beyond the direct financing of individual projects. Its establishment has contributed to changing expectations surrounding academic careers, research autonomy, and the institutional meaning of scientific excellence in Europe [6]. The ERC model has

also affected the organization of research systems and the ways in which national institutions respond to international competition for prestigious funding. Its influence can be observed in the increasing importance attached to excellence-oriented policies, individual scientific reputation, and competitive mechanisms for allocating research resources [24]. In this sense, the ERC has helped shape both research practices and the broader institutional environment in which scientific work is evaluated and supported.

Nevertheless, the growing emphasis on European competition and excellence has generated important debates [49]. Evidence from the early stages of the ERC program suggested that its introduction could, in some circumstances, be associated with weaker cross-border collaboration [25]. Other research has questioned whether the broader development of certain technical and scientific fields within the European Union has improved sufficiently relative to global trends despite the availability of ERC funding [26]. Concerns have also been raised about the relationship between the ERC's organizational design, its autonomy, and its operational effectiveness [24,30]. A further issue concerns the possible tension between rewarding exceptional individual projects and promoting genuinely interdisciplinary research. When assessment places primary emphasis on the excellence of individual investigators and proposals, collaborative and cross-disciplinary forms of knowledge production may face challenges that are not easily captured through conventional evaluation criteria [27].

These concerns suggest that the pursuit of excellence requires a balance between rewarding exceptional scholarship and maintaining conditions that encourage interaction across disciplines. Questions concerning funding distribution, institutional independence, and organizational efficiency therefore remain relevant to discussions of the ERC's long-term role within the European research system [28]. Such debates are especially important because the ERC has become both a source of financial support and a powerful symbol of academic distinction.

Another major challenge concerns the evaluation of an exceptionally large number of highly competitive applications. Although the ERC employs multiple procedures and assessment mechanisms, the demand for funding is so substantial that many proposals judged to be scientifically strong cannot ultimately receive support [9]. The scarcity of available grants relative to the number of applications has also led to the argument that ERC success may function partly as an institutional signal of excellence. From this perspective, obtaining an ERC grant can influence how universities, research organizations, and national systems are perceived, in ways comparable to other widely recognized indicators of academic prestige [29].

The difficulty of evaluating frontier research has encouraged efforts to complement traditional peer-review processes with quantitative approaches. One proposed framework combines expert judgment with bibliometric and scientometric indicators related to characteristics such as novelty, interdisciplinarity, and research risk, thereby attempting to identify dimensions associated with frontier-oriented scholarship [30]. However, methodological innovation alone does not eliminate the underlying pressure created by the continuing growth in proposal submissions.

More recently, computational approaches have been considered as possible tools for supporting the management of large application volumes. Machine-learning methods, for example, have demonstrated potential for accurately classifying and filtering proposal abstracts, which could assist in handling preliminary stages of large-scale evaluation [22]. At the same time, the use of such technologies raises questions concerning transparency, fairness, and the appropriate relationship between automated screening and expert judgment. Despite their potential value, there was no official ERC position at the time of the cited research establishing machine learning as a formal component of the grant evaluation process [31]. Together, these developments demonstrate that the ERC remains not only a major funding institution but also an evolving model for defining, identifying, and evaluating research excellence within an increasingly competitive European scientific environment

This study focuses on France and the Netherlands, two European countries that demonstrated particularly strong ERC funding performance during the 2019–2023 period. In terms of the total number of ERC grants awarded, France occupied second position with 666 grants, including 104 in

the Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) domain, while the Netherlands ranked third with 614 grants, of which 201 were awarded in SH. Both countries followed Germany in the overall distribution of ERC awards during the study period, making them particularly suitable cases for examining different pathways through which research excellence is institutionally organized (Figure 1).

The rationale for comparing these countries extends beyond their strong numerical representation among ERC recipients. Previous studies have examined ERC-related performance within individual national research systems and organizations, although the evidence remains fragmented. Earlier work investigated the relationship between institutional research performance and ERC success in areas such as biotechnology [32]. Other studies have assessed the performance of national research organizations while addressing issues including open-access practices and gender differences [60,5]. Research has also explored the publication performance of scholars in countries with smaller or differently positioned research systems [25]. In addition, institutional and political barriers affecting researchers from particular national contexts have been examined, especially where access to ERC funding is influenced by changes in national or international research arrangements [10]. Comparative work has further considered the relationship between domestic and ERC-level funding opportunities in countries located outside Europe's principal research centres [33].

Despite this growing body of scholarship, highly successful ERC-performing countries have received comparatively limited attention as a distinct group, particularly in direct cross-national comparisons of individual awardees and

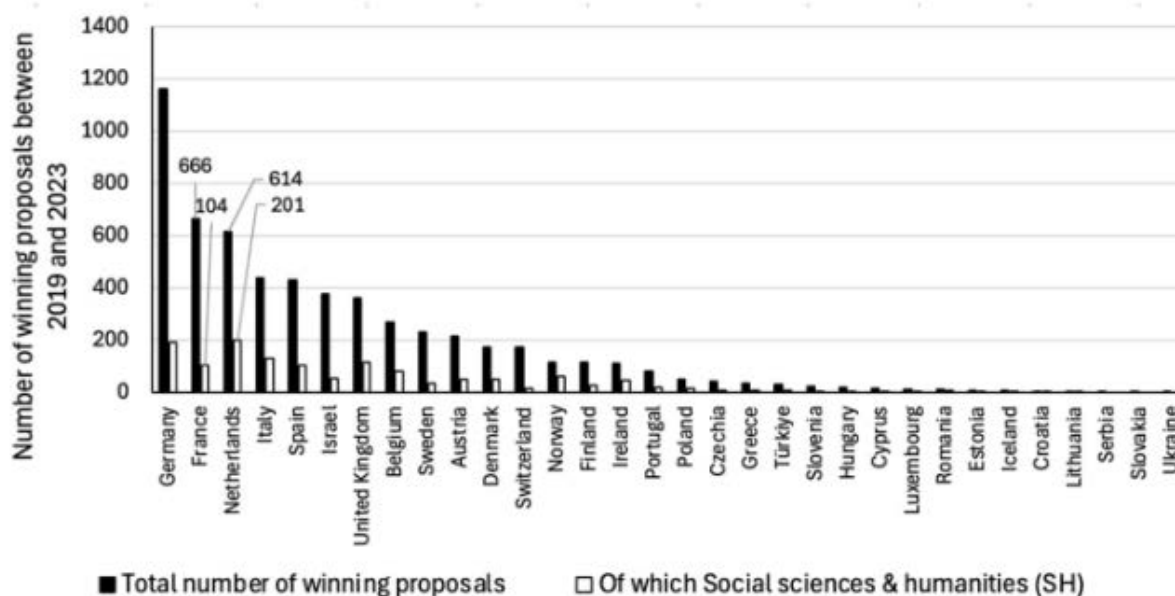


Figure 1: Distribution of ERC grant recipients by country, 2019–2023, with particular emphasis on France and the Netherlands. *Source: Authors' compilation based on ERC data.*

their scholarly performance. Existing studies have therefore provided valuable institutional, national, and thematic perspectives, but they have not sufficiently addressed how different high-performing research systems may generate and sustain excellence through contrasting organizational arrangements. The comparison between France and the Netherlands offers an opportunity to address this gap [34].

The two countries represent notably different, yet equally competitive, institutional settings. France has historically been associated with a more centrally coordinated research system in which major public and national research organizations play a prominent role. The Dutch model, in contrast, places universities at the centre of research production and provides substantial institutional autonomy to higher education institutions. Although national research systems across Europe differ considerably in their governance structures, funding arrangements, and institutional organization [35], the French and Dutch cases present a particularly useful contrast between two approaches to organizing research excellence.

A historical perspective helps clarify the foundations of the French model. Research and innovation in France have traditionally developed through structured national and regional arrangements that connect scientific expertise, technological capabilities, and wider innovation networks [36,37]. Although the system has undergone substantial reform, moving gradually away from exclusively top-down coordination toward greater use of bottom-up initiatives and market-oriented mechanisms, state influence has remained an important feature of research governance [27]. This development has produced a more complex, multilevel system rather than a complete departure from central coordination [38].

The central role of national public research organizations is particularly significant in this context. The Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), established in 1939, was created to coordinate previously dispersed research activity and to provide a national institutional framework for scientific inquiry. Its position within the French research landscape reflects the continuing importance of public coordination and state involvement in shaping research priorities [4]. Through an extensive network of laboratories and research units, national organizations continue to influence the distribution of resources, the organization of personnel, and the development of research agendas.

France has also developed competitive funding mechanisms intended to support investigator-led research. A national scheme introduced in 2005 shares certain features with the ERC's emphasis on individual projects, although its scale, financial resources, and number of supported projects remain substantially smaller than those associated with the ERC [14]. The French model consequently combines

centralized institutional capacity with competitive project-based funding, producing a research environment in which national organizations and individual excellence coexist.

This system, however, is not without limitations. Previous assessments have identified concerns related to the efficiency of technology transfer, discontinuities in research policy, and the administrative complexity of institutional procedures [39]. At the same time, centralized arrangements may offer advantages by enabling coordinated action, reducing fragmentation in selected areas, supporting multidisciplinary initiatives, and facilitating the development of specialized centres of research excellence [7]. The French case therefore illustrates both the potential benefits and the organizational challenges associated with strong national coordination.

The Dutch research system follows a different institutional trajectory. Universities constitute the principal setting for a large share of research activity, supported by a long historical tradition of scientific development and internationally recognized higher education institutions. The country's research infrastructure has been shaped by the strong role of universities and by a funding system designed to promote scientific quality, innovation, and societal relevance. The Dutch Research Council (NWO), established in 1950, occupies an important position in this structure by supporting and coordinating research while operating primarily as a funding body rather than as a centralized organization directly conducting research [9,40].

Research governance in the Netherlands is also characterized by a high degree of professionalization and extensive interaction between universities, economic actors, and wider society. Scientific and technological activities are increasingly linked with broader social objectives, including through approaches associated with Responsible Research and Innovation [41]. This orientation encourages research institutions to consider societal needs alongside scientific advancement and contributes to the country's capacity to connect knowledge production with innovation.

Institutional autonomy represents another important characteristic of the Dutch model. Universities generally possess considerable independence in shaping their research strategies and have developed strong traditions of inter-institutional cooperation [41,39]. Rather than relying primarily on a single national organization to conduct research, the Dutch system distributes research capacity across universities and encourages partnerships among institutions and researchers. This organizational structure has contributed to a research environment in which cooperation can function as an important complement to competition.

Internationalization is similarly central to the Dutch research landscape. National and institutional strategies have encouraged international partnerships, mobility, student

exchange, and cross-border research cooperation [42,43]. The expansion and institutional recognition of research activities within universities of applied sciences have further diversified the national knowledge system and strengthened its innovation potential. Dutch research also demonstrates considerable international visibility, particularly in areas connected with global societal challenges such as sustainability. Its influence can be observed not only through scholarly citations but also through references in patents and policy-related documents, indicating connections between academic research, innovation, and decision-making.

The contrast between these two systems provides the foundation for the present analysis. France and the Netherlands have both achieved substantial success within ERC competitions, yet their institutional environments differ in important respects. One relies more strongly on nationally coordinated public research organizations, whereas the other places universities and relatively decentralized institutional structures at the centre of knowledge production. Comparing these models offers an opportunity to examine whether different organizational pathways are associated with distinctive patterns of publication activity, disciplinary specialization, collaboration, and scholarly visibility.

Against this background, the study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: What are the principal characteristics of ERC-funded projects and grant recipients in France and the Netherlands?

RQ2: How do the French and Dutch research models differ with respect to the publication performance of individual ERC grant recipients?

RQ3: To what extent do scholarly collaboration networks contribute to ERC-related research performance within these two national models?

By addressing these questions, the study examines research excellence not simply as an outcome measured by the number of grants obtained, but as a phenomenon shaped by institutional organization and scholarly practice. The analysis of publication patterns, thematic activity, collaboration structures, and research visibility is intended to clarify how two highly successful but structurally different national systems support internationally competitive research. In doing so, the comparison provides a broader perspective on the institutional conditions through which research excellence is produced and sustained within the European research landscape.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Sources and Study Period

The study integrates information obtained from three principal sources: Scopus, SciVal, and the European Research Council (ERC) database. Two related datasets

were constructed for the analysis. The first, referred to as the **project dataset**, covers ERC-funded projects awarded between 2019 and 2023. The second, the **publication dataset**, was designed to examine the scholarly output of individual grant recipients over a ten-year period, from 2014 to 2023.

The analysis was restricted to the ERC's Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) domain. During the study period, this domain was organized into seven disciplinary panels, as presented in (Table 1).

ERC Panel Code	Panel Name
SH1	Individuals, Markets and Organisations
SH2	Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems
SH3	The Social World and Its Interactions
SH4	The Human Mind and Its Complexity
SH5	Cultures and Cultural Production
SH6	The Study of the Human Past
SH7	Human Mobility, Environment, and Space

Table 1: ERC Social Sciences and Humanities panels by panel code and designation.

The decision to concentrate on SH research was based on both substantive and methodological considerations. Research in the social sciences and humanities is strongly influenced by national institutions, cultural traditions, language, and policy environments. These characteristics make the domain particularly appropriate for investigating whether different national models of research governance are associated with variations in publication behavior, research priorities, and collaboration. In comparison with many areas of the natural sciences, where research questions and communication practices are often more internationally standardized, SH scholarship frequently retains stronger connections to national and regional academic contexts [44].

The SH domain is also important because it has received comparatively less attention in quantitative research evaluation. Earlier scholarship has identified persistent difficulties in applying conventional bibliometric approaches to the humanities and some social science disciplines [28,40]. In addition, previous work examining ERC-funded researchers has concentrated more heavily on other scientific domains, including life sciences and physical sciences and engineering, leaving SH comparatively less explored [46]. Focusing on SH therefore provides an opportunity to extend empirical evidence on the research performance of ERC grant recipients while addressing an area that remains underrepresented in both scientometric assessment and ERC-related research [45].

This disciplinary focus also enables an examination of the possibilities and limitations of bibliometric indicators in fields that are not equally represented across major international databases. The study consequently contributes

to the wider methodological discussion surrounding the measurement and evaluation of research in the social sciences and humanities, where publication cultures, language practices, and disciplinary traditions can influence the interpretation of quantitative indicators [46].

Project Selection and Dataset Construction

For the Netherlands, an initial set of 201 ERC-funded SH projects was retrieved from the ERC database. Following data screening and eligibility checks, 196 projects were retained for analysis, corresponding to 97.51% of the original records. The French dataset initially contained 104 project records, of which 98 satisfied the inclusion requirements, representing 94.23% of the original dataset.

The retained French and Dutch records were subsequently merged to create the final project dataset. Records were excluded when information essential for the analysis was missing. Specifically, projects were removed if one or more of the following elements could not be identified: the name of the researcher or researchers, host institution, country, project title, project abstract, or ERC domain classification [47].

After the eligible projects and associated ERC recipients had been identified, publication records were collected

for the individual researchers. Scopus data were accessed and processed with support from SciVal, Python-based procedures, and the Scopus Application Programming Interface (API). The publication search was structured to capture research output within the defined observation period and to allow assessment of scholarly activity in relation to the period surrounding ERC project success.

The resulting publication dataset contained 2786 records associated with French researchers and 7228 records associated with Dutch researchers, yielding a combined total of 9996 publications. According to the Scopus records, all publications included in the final dataset were published in English. Both national datasets were manually screened for duplicate entries, and no duplications were identified. The data collection process was completed on 30 September 2024 (Figure 2).

Thematic Analysis of ERC Projects

To address **RQ1**, which concerns the main characteristics and thematic composition of ERC-funded SH projects in France and the Netherlands, a semantic topic-modeling procedure was applied using BERTopic. This approach is based on transformer-based language models and identifies

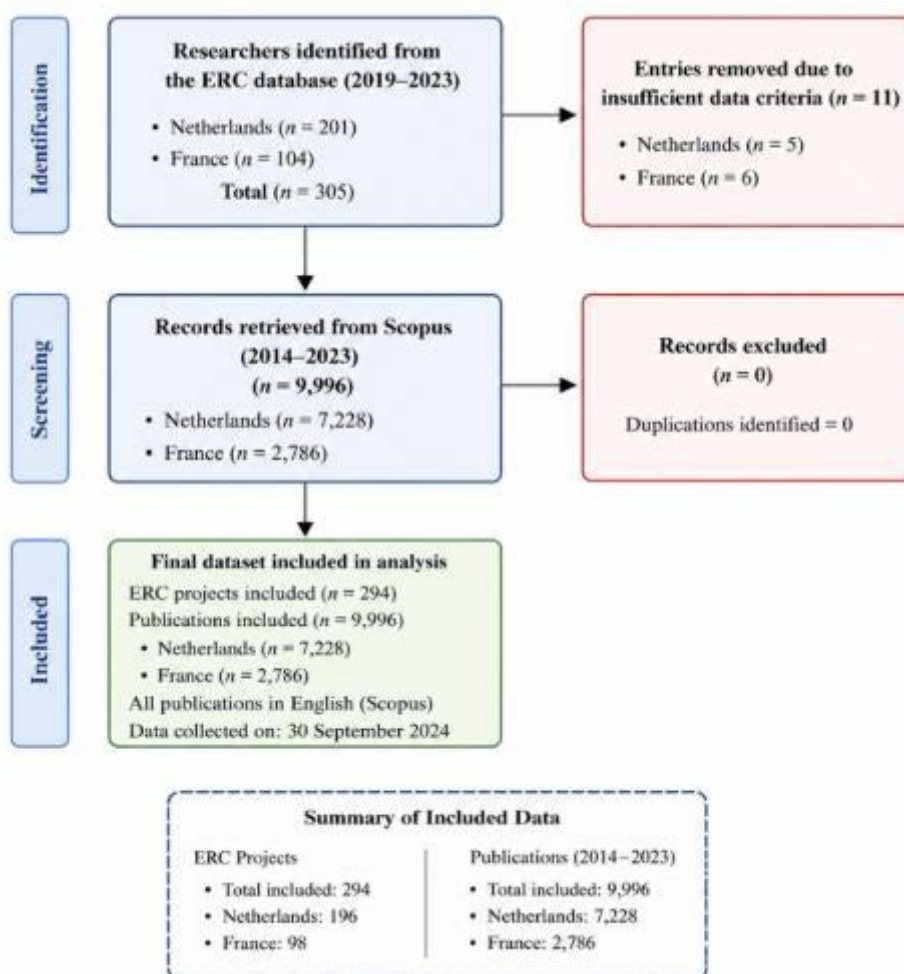


Figure 2: Process for identifying, screening, and selecting ERC projects and publication records. *Source: Authors' compilation.*

patterns of semantic similarity between documents rather than relying solely on the frequency with which individual words occur [18,36].

Project abstracts and relevant metadata, including country affiliation and ERC panel assignment, were extracted from the project dataset. Each abstract was then transformed into a high-dimensional semantic representation using the MiniLM-L6-v2 model available through the Sentence-Transformers framework. These representations, or embeddings, allow documents with similar contextual meanings to be positioned closer together within the semantic space [48].

BERTopic was subsequently used to identify groups of semantically related project abstracts. The method combines embedding-based document representation, density-oriented clustering, and class-based term frequency-inverse document frequency (c-TF-IDF) techniques to detect and describe coherent topics. Unlike approaches such as KMeans, the procedure does not require the researcher to define the number of clusters before the analysis is performed. Topic groups are instead identified from naturally occurring patterns within the semantic representation of the documents.

The approach also differs from conventional clustering procedures that depend primarily on predefined internal validation measures, such as the silhouette coefficient or the Davies–Bouldin Index. In BERTopic, topics emerge from the density and semantic relationships observed among the documents, after which representative terms are generated for each cluster. To improve the clarity of interpretation, descriptive topic labels were manually assigned based on the five most representative c-TF-IDF terms associated with each topic.

The methodological approach was also informed by earlier research that applied topic modeling to investigate the thematic and interdisciplinary characteristics of ERC-funded projects [8]. The present analysis builds on this methodological direction while using semantic clustering to provide a complementary perspective on the thematic structure of SH projects [49].

Subject Classification and Publication Performance

The **All-Science Journal Classification (ASJC)** system was also incorporated into the analytical framework. The ASJC scheme categorizes scholarly journals according to defined subject areas and disciplines, thereby enabling publications to be grouped and compared across fields. This classification is particularly useful in bibliometric research because publication and citation patterns vary substantially between disciplinary areas.

To answer **RQ2**, which examines differences in publication performance between individual ERC recipients in the two

national settings, publication trends were assessed using the compound annual growth rate (CAGR). CAGR provides a standardized measure of average annual growth over a specified time interval and is suitable for examining changes in publication output over multiple years [47]. Annual publication patterns were further examined through graphical trendlines to identify broader changes in research productivity.

Collaboration and Citation Impact Analysis

For **RQ3**, co-authorship analysis was performed using the publication dataset. Co-authorship is widely used as an indicator of research collaboration and can assist in identifying patterns of scholarly interaction, highly connected researchers, and the broader structure of collaborative networks [35,50]. The analysis was therefore used to investigate the prevalence and organization of collaboration among the French and Dutch ERC recipients.

In addition to network structure, the study considered the **Field-Weighted Citation Impact (FWCI)** as an indicator of relative citation performance. FWCI compares the citation impact of a publication with the expected global citation level for comparable publications within the same field. A value of 1.0 indicates citation performance equivalent to the world average for the relevant field and publication type. Values above 1.0 indicate citation performance exceeding the global benchmark, whereas values below 1.0 indicate performance below the expected average. The use of FWCI is particularly relevant in cross-disciplinary analyses because citation practices differ considerably across research areas.

Data Visualization

Data processing and visualization were undertaken using Python. Figures were generated with the Matplotlib library, while collaboration networks were visualized and explored using Gephi version 0.10.1. Tables and graphical representations were prepared and adapted by the authors on the basis of the collected and processed datasets.

RESULTS

Characteristics of French and Dutch ERC Winner Projects (RQ1)

The distribution of ERC-funded projects across the seven Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) panels reveals clear differences between France and the Netherlands. Overall, the Dutch project portfolio was more broadly distributed across the SH domain, whereas the French portfolio showed greater concentration in selected disciplinary areas. France outperformed the Netherlands only in SH1, with 23 funded projects compared with four in the Netherlands. SH1 was therefore one of the principal areas of French strength, together with SH4. The pattern was reversed across several other panels. The Netherlands recorded substantially higher numbers of projects in SH2 (34 compared with 7), SH3 (43

compared with 7), SH5 (34 compared with 12), and SH7 (17 compared with 7).

SH4 represented an important area of activity for both countries. France received 27 projects in this panel, while the Netherlands accounted for 49, indicating a considerably stronger Dutch presence in research related to cognition, psychology, and the complexities of the human mind. In contrast, SH6, which covers historical research, displayed an identical level of representation, with 15 projects from each country.

To determine whether these differences reflected a statistically meaningful association between country and disciplinary distribution, a chi-square test of independence was performed. The result was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 51.14$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, the distribution of ERC-funded projects across SH panels differed significantly between France and the Netherlands. The observed variation is consistent with the contrasting institutional and a research structure discussed earlier and suggests that national research environments may be associated with distinct patterns of disciplinary specialization [50].

At a broader level, the Netherlands demonstrated a relatively diversified project profile, with strong representation across several areas, particularly those concerned with governance, social diversity, and cultural production. France showed a more concentrated pattern, with pronounced activity in research on individuals, markets, organizations, and the human mind. These findings indicate that the two countries reached comparable levels of ERC success through different disciplinary configurations rather than through identical research portfolios (Figure 3).

The institutional distribution of successful projects further illustrates the differences between the two national models. Among the ten leading host institutions, the University of Amsterdam recorded the highest number of ERC-funded projects, with 37 awards during the study period. The composition of the leading institutions also reflected a notable structural contrast. Dutch ERC recipients were hosted exclusively by universities within the leading group, emphasizing the central role of higher education institutions in the country's research system. In France, successful projects were more frequently associated with a wider range of research institutions and organizations. The Jean Jacques Laffont Foundation represented the principal exception to the university-based pattern among the institutions considered, as it operates in association with the Toulouse School of Economics while maintaining a distinct organizational identity. Overall, the institutional findings support the distinction between a university-centred Dutch model and a French system in which national and specialized research institutions play a more visible role (Figure 4).

The semantic analysis of project abstracts using BERTopic identified four principal thematic clusters, together with a separate group of abstracts that could not be assigned confidently to a stable thematic category. The largest cluster comprised 133 abstracts and was labelled “**Global Research and Cultural Systems**.” Projects within this group addressed issues associated with globalization, cultural change, historical structures, transnational processes, and the evolution of human societies.

The second-largest cluster, “**Cognitive Science and Neural Research**,” included 65 abstracts. Its projects were primarily

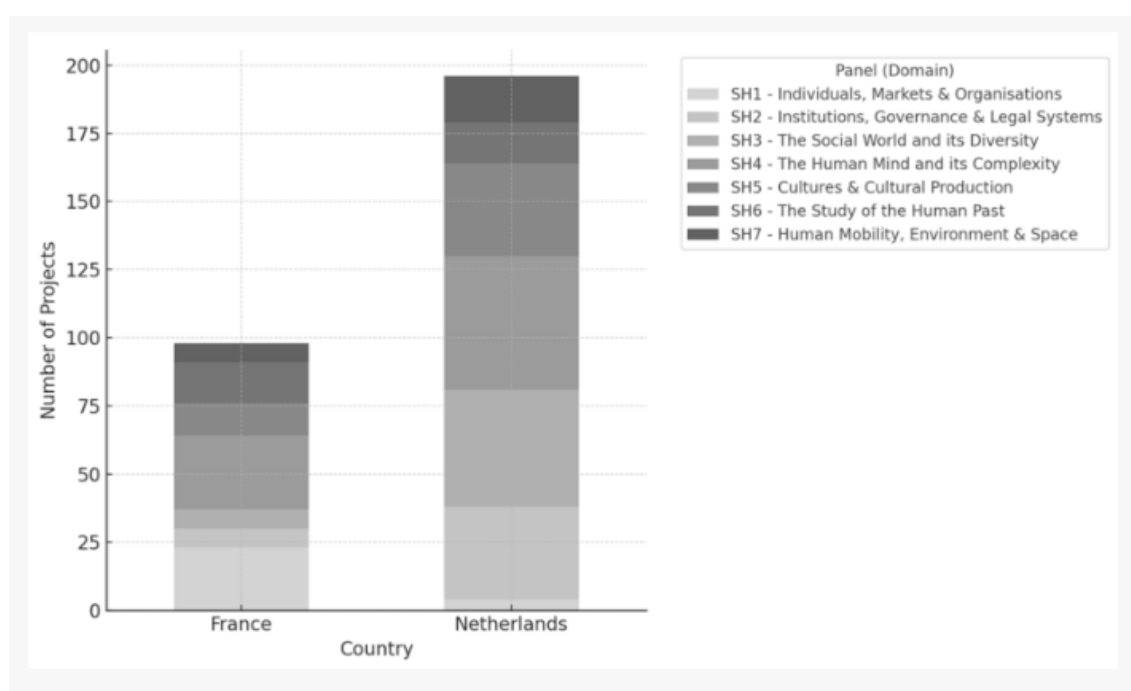


Figure 3: Distribution of ERC-funded projects across SH panels in France and the Netherlands. *Source: Authors' compilation based on ERC data.*

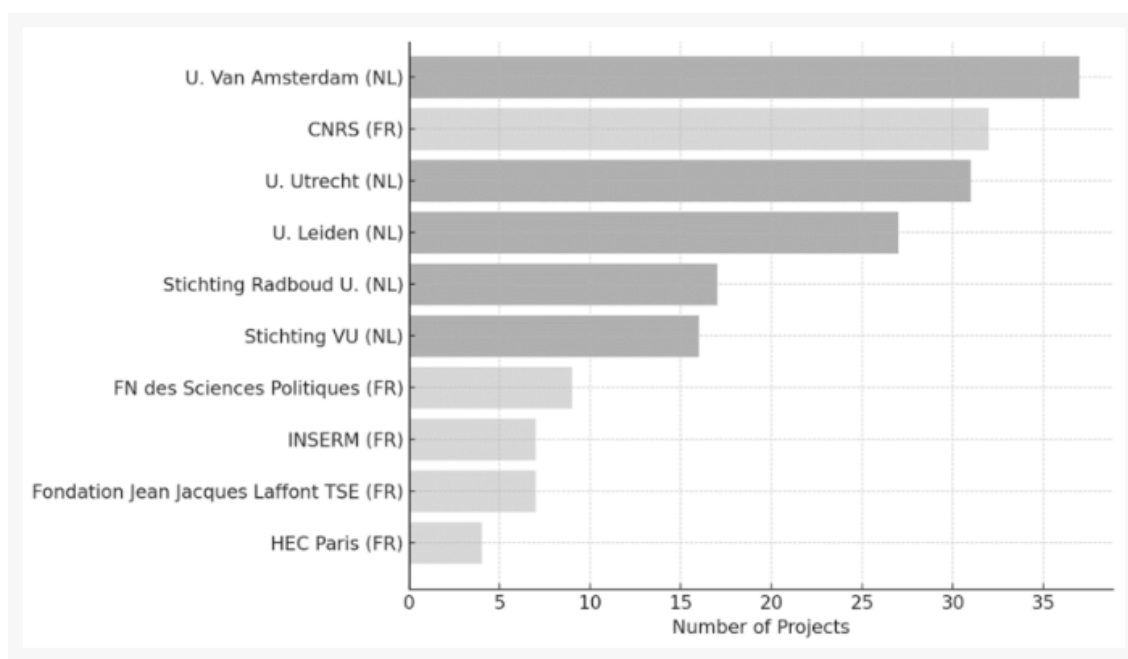


Figure 4: Leading French and Dutch host institutions according to the number of ERC grants awarded. *Source: Authors' compilation based on ERC data.*

concerned with cognition, perception, brain function, neural processes, and related psychological mechanisms. The prominence of this topic was consistent with the strong representation of projects within SH4, which focuses on research concerning the human mind and its complexity.

A third thematic cluster, **“Political Institutions and Data Analysis,”** contained 26 project abstracts. This group combined research on governance and institutional systems with quantitative, computational, and empirical approaches to the study of social and political phenomena. Frequently occurring concepts were associated with voting, regulation, political behaviour, decision-making, and data-based analytical methods.

The smallest of the four principal clusters, **“Labor and Economic Structures,”** consisted of 11 abstracts. Although limited in numerical size, the group showed a coherent conceptual focus on employment, labour markets, inequality, work, and economic justice. A further set of 59 abstracts was categorized as outliers or thematically unassigned. These records did not display sufficient semantic similarity to support a reliable assignment to one of the four dominant clusters. In several cases, the abstracts contained highly diverse themes or lacked the degree of topical concentration required for stable clustering.

Comparison of the thematic profiles revealed further differences between the two countries. The Netherlands accounted for more than 60% of the projects classified within the **“Global Research and Cultural Systems”** cluster, demonstrating its particularly strong presence in this broad thematic area. The French projects were distributed more evenly across the identified clusters, although France

had a comparatively stronger representation in **“Political Institutions and Data Analysis”** and **“Labor and Economic Structures.”**

The two countries contributed at broadly similar levels to **“Cognitive Science and Neural Research,”** reinforcing the importance of this thematic area within both national portfolios. This pattern also corresponds closely with the high number of SH4-funded projects identified in the panel-level analysis.

An examination of the relationship between the semantic clusters and ERC panels provided additional support for the coherence of the topic-modeling results. **“Global Research and Cultural Systems”** was most closely connected with SH3, *The Social World and its Diversity*, and SH5, *Cultures and Cultural Production*. **“Cognitive Science and Neural Research”** was associated predominantly with SH4, *The Human Mind and its Complexity*, reflecting the close correspondence between the semantic content of the abstracts and the formal ERC panel classification.

Projects assigned to **“Political Institutions and Data Analysis”** were concentrated mainly within SH2, *Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems*, and SH1, *Individuals, Markets and Organizations*. The smaller **“Labor and Economic Structures”** cluster was distributed primarily between SH2 and SH3. These overlaps demonstrate that the semantic topics identified through the analysis do not always correspond to a single administrative panel. Instead, several themes extend across formal disciplinary boundaries, particularly where institutional, economic, social, and data-driven research approaches intersect.

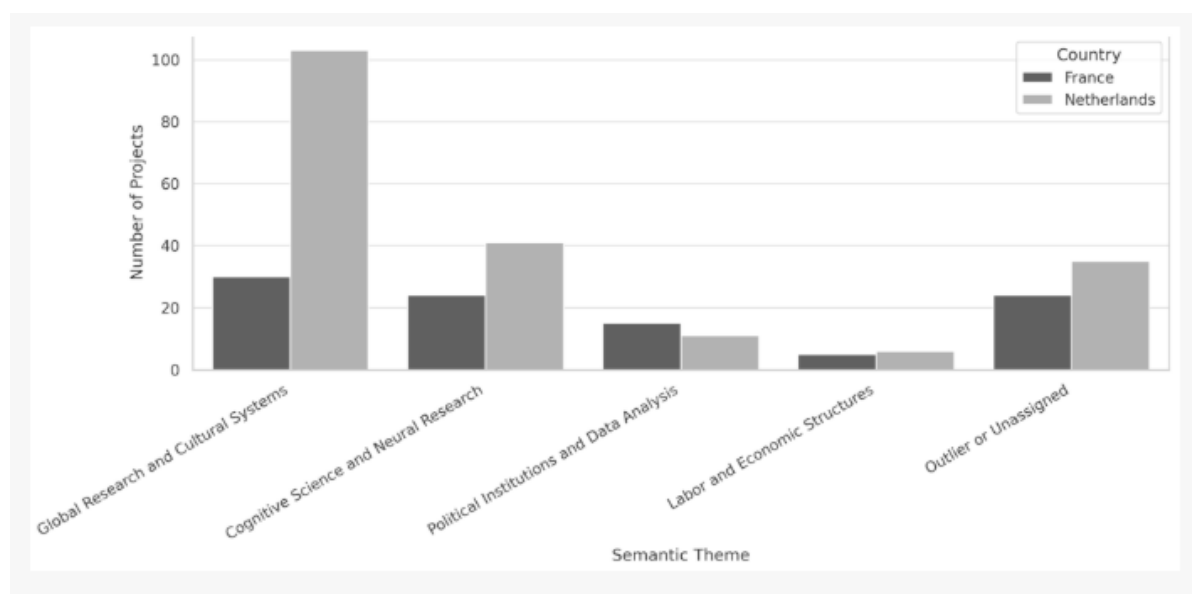


Figure 5: Semantic thematic clusters of ERC project abstracts identified through BERTopic analysis. *Source: Authors' compilation based on ERC data.*

Taken together, the panel and topic analyses indicate that French and Dutch ERC success in the SH domain is characterized by distinct disciplinary and thematic profiles. The Netherlands demonstrated greater breadth across the panel structure and a particularly strong presence in globally and culturally oriented research, whereas France displayed more concentrated strengths in selected areas. The cross-panel connections observed in the semantic analysis further highlight the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of a substantial proportion of ERC-funded research, particularly in projects combining institutional questions with quantitative or data-oriented approaches (**Figure 5**).

DISCUSSION

The present study examined differences in the characteristics, publication patterns, and collaborative structures of European Research Council (ERC) grant recipients in France and the Netherlands, two of the strongest-performing national contexts in the ERC funding landscape. By comparing project portfolios, individual publication performance, and co-authorship networks, the findings demonstrate that similar levels of research success can emerge from substantially different institutional arrangements. The results suggest that research governance, disciplinary specialization, and collaborative practices interact in shaping how academic excellence is expressed and sustained [46].

Diverse, Interdisciplinary, and Multifaceted: Key Characteristics of French and Dutch ERC Grant-Winning Projects (RQ1)

The analysis of ERC-funded projects revealed substantial differences in disciplinary distribution and thematic orientation between the two countries. The Netherlands recorded a stronger presence in most SH panels, whereas

France showed a more concentrated pattern of specialization. France led only in SH1, the panel concerned with individuals, markets, and organizations, while Dutch projects were more evenly distributed across the broader range of SH disciplines.

This contrast is noteworthy because it points to different patterns of research organization. The Dutch portfolio was characterized by wider disciplinary coverage, with substantial representation in areas related to institutions, governance, social diversity, cultural production, and the human mind. The French portfolio, in comparison, demonstrated stronger concentration in selected fields. Such variation is broadly consistent with the different institutional configurations of the two national research systems.

The thematic analysis provided additional support for this interpretation. Dutch ERC projects covered a comparatively broad range of semantic areas, including global and cultural systems, social diversity, political institutions, and cognitive research. French projects displayed a more focused distribution across thematic areas, with relatively stronger representation in selected institutional, economic, cultural, and cognitive topics. These findings suggest that the Dutch research environment may provide conditions that support broader disciplinary diversification, while the French system may facilitate the development of stronger concentrations within particular research traditions and institutional domains [47].

The results should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that one governance model is inherently superior. A diversified system may encourage exploration across a wider range of fields and facilitate interaction among disciplines, whereas a more concentrated system may support the development of specialized expertise and sustained research capacity in established areas. Both models can therefore

create favourable conditions for research excellence, although they appear to do so through different institutional pathways.

More broadly, the findings indicate that national research structures are associated with the thematic composition of internationally competitive projects. The decentralized and university-centred organization of Dutch research appears to coincide with a relatively balanced and wide-ranging SH portfolio. The French model, characterized by a stronger role for national and specialized research organizations, is associated with greater disciplinary concentration. These patterns provide further evidence that research excellence should not be treated as a uniform outcome independent of institutional context [48].

Publication Performance Comparison of the French Centralized and Dutch Decentralized Models (RQ2)

The publication analysis identified a marked difference in scholarly output between ERC recipients in the two countries. Dutch researchers accounted for 7228 publications during the study period, compared with 2786 publications produced by their French counterparts. The difference was also evident in the growth trajectories of publication output. The compound annual growth rate was approximately 5.42% for the Dutch group and 2.67% for the French group.

These findings indicate that Dutch ERC recipients not only produced a larger volume of publications but also experienced faster growth in research output over time. One possible interpretation is that the decentralized and university-based structure of the Dutch research system provides favourable conditions for expanding research activities, developing new collaborations, and scaling publication output. The French pattern was comparatively more gradual, suggesting a steadier trajectory of publication growth [37].

The results nevertheless require careful interpretation. Publication volume alone cannot provide a complete measure of research quality or scientific contribution, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, where publication cultures differ substantially across disciplines. The higher output observed among Dutch recipients should therefore be understood as one dimension of research performance rather than as definitive evidence of greater overall research quality. Similarly, the slower growth pattern among French researchers may reflect differences in disciplinary specialization, institutional structures, and preferred forms of scholarly communication.

The contrast is particularly striking given the substantial difference in the population size of the two countries. The Netherlands has a considerably smaller population than France, yet its ERC recipients generated a much larger volume of publications within the examined dataset. This suggests that national scale alone is insufficient to explain differences

in research productivity. Institutional organization, concentration of research resources, internationalization, and collaboration may also play important roles in determining the output of highly successful researchers.

The ASJC classification and thematic analyses further showed that ERC-funded researchers in both countries were active across disciplinary boundaries. A substantial share of the publication activity extended into areas often positioned at the intersection of the social sciences, humanities, psychology, neuroscience, and other life science-related fields. Research on cognition, brain function, psychology, and related topics featured prominently in the publication profiles of both national groups [39].

At the same time, traditional SH disciplines remained strongly represented. Linguistics, sociology, law, political science, and archaeology were among the frequently occurring subject areas, demonstrating that the expansion of interdisciplinary research has not displaced conventional disciplinary foundations. Rather, the findings indicate that contemporary SH research increasingly combines established fields with approaches and topics that cross conventional disciplinary classifications.

Climate change also appeared prominently across the analyses. Its visibility in the publication and thematic patterns demonstrates the extent to which ERC-funded researchers in both countries engage with major global challenges. This is particularly relevant in light of the ERC's continued support for ambitious frontier research capable of addressing complex scientific and societal questions. The prominence of climate-related work therefore represents an important area for future country-level and cross-national analyses of research specialization and impact.

Overall, the publication findings suggest that the Dutch model is associated with higher publication volume and more rapid growth among the ERC recipients included in this study, whereas the French model is associated with a more measured growth pattern. Rather than representing a simple contrast between success and underperformance, these outcomes point to different modes through which highly productive research systems can organize and sustain scholarly activity.

Prevalence of Networks Among ERC-Winning French and Dutch Researchers (RQ3)

The co-authorship findings provide further insight into the role of collaboration in the two research systems. The Dutch network was more interconnected and contained a larger number of overlapping relationships among researchers. Several sizeable clusters were also visible, indicating extensive interaction across groups and suggesting that collaborative ties extend beyond small, isolated research teams.

This structure is consistent with a research environment in which universities, international partnerships, and interdisciplinary connections play a substantial role. The presence of multiple interconnected clusters suggests that Dutch ERC recipients operate within broader collaborative structures that can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and access to diverse forms of expertise.

The French co-authorship network displayed a different configuration. Collaboration was clearly important, but the overall structure appeared more concentrated around institutional and organizational centres. Connections between authors were comparatively less extensive across the wider network, suggesting that collaborative activity may be more strongly organized around specific institutions, projects, or established research units. The major role of public research organizations within the French research system may contribute to the formation of such institutionally anchored collaborative hubs [24].

Despite these structural differences, collaborative publication was common in both countries. Single-authored work represented only 11.7% of the French publications and 12.8% of the Dutch publications. Thus, approximately nine out of every ten publications in both datasets involved more than one author. This finding highlights the increasing importance of teamwork even within fields traditionally associated with individual scholarship.

The analysis also indicated that collaboration was related to research visibility. Publications involving international partners generally achieved stronger citation performance and higher Field-Weighted Citation Impact values. This pattern was especially evident among Dutch researchers, suggesting that broad international networks may contribute not only to publication output but also to the global reach and influence of research [34,35].

These results reinforce the importance of considering collaboration as a central component of contemporary research performance. The ERC evaluates individual researchers and individual project proposals at a highly competitive level, yet the research produced by successful recipients is often embedded within extensive collaborative environments. Individual excellence and collaborative research should therefore not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Instead, high-level individual achievement may increasingly depend on access to strong networks capable of bringing together complementary expertise, methodological capabilities, and international perspectives.

The Dutch findings are particularly consistent with the existence of a strong collaborative research culture. The broader and more horizontally connected network may support productivity by facilitating the circulation of ideas across institutions and disciplines. The French model also supports substantial collaboration, although the pattern

appears to be more closely linked to institutional structures and specialized research hubs [37-39].

It would be premature, however, to conclude that centralized research organization necessarily restricts collaboration. The results instead suggest that governance structures may influence the **form** and **distribution** of collaboration. A decentralized environment may encourage wider connections among multiple universities and international partners, while a system containing strong national research organizations may generate dense networks centred on major institutional hubs. Both arrangements can support excellent research, but they may do so through different network architectures.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

The findings contribute to the expanding body of research examining how the ERC influences scientific excellence, research careers, and the organization of European research [12,68,48,46]. Previous studies have investigated ERC-related outcomes within individual national contexts and organizations, including research systems in Spain, Italy, and Hungary [1,60,25]. Other work has examined more narrowly defined disciplinary or panel-specific settings, including research focused on individual components of the SH domain [68].

Comparative evidence involving countries at the forefront of ERC performance, however, remains relatively limited. The present study addresses this gap by comparing two highly successful national systems while simultaneously considering differences in research governance. Rather than examining ERC success solely through grant counts or bibliometric indicators, the analysis connects institutional organization with project specialization, publication output, and collaborative structures.

This approach is important because it brings together two perspectives that are often examined separately. Scientometric studies commonly focus on measurable outcomes such as publications, citations, and network structures, whereas research policy analyses emphasize governance, institutional arrangements, and funding systems. By combining these perspectives, the present study demonstrates how national research structures may be linked with observable differences in scholarly performance [46].

The findings also contribute to continuing discussions concerning structural inequalities and institutional influences within European research funding [12]. Access to prestigious funding opportunities can be shaped by institutional resources, career trajectories, organizational support, and the wider position of researchers within national and international research systems. The results therefore support the need to examine excellence within its

institutional setting rather than treating grant success as the outcome of individual merit alone.

A further contribution concerns the relationship between individual excellence and collaboration. Although ERC funding is strongly centred on the scientific quality and potential of individual principal investigators and their projects, the present results demonstrate that collaborative networks remain highly relevant to research performance. International partnerships, in particular, were associated with greater visibility and stronger citation impact. This observation is consistent with earlier evidence highlighting the role of co-authorship networks in supporting productivity and scholarly influence within the SH domain [28].

The present analysis extends this line of inquiry by examining collaboration across the full SH portfolio represented in the dataset. It also identifies meaningful national differences in network structure. The Dutch system was characterized by more widely distributed and interconnected collaborative ties, whereas the French network showed stronger institutional concentration around major research organizations. These findings demonstrate that aggregate measures of collaboration may conceal important differences in the way research partnerships are organized.

The use of semantic topic modeling represents an additional contribution. Earlier work has investigated the interdisciplinary structure of ERC-funded research projects [8]. The present study applies a related analytical perspective specifically to the SH domain and examines whether the thematic composition of successful projects differs between national research environments. The results identified clear national patterns, including stronger Dutch representation in broad global, cultural, and institutional themes and relatively concentrated French strengths in selected cognitive, linguistic, political, and economic areas.

These differences can also be interpreted in relation to longer-standing disciplinary traditions. The Dutch profile is consistent with the country's established international presence in influential areas of social science research [34,40,50]. The French concentration in cognitive research, psychology, language, and related fields similarly corresponds with historically important traditions in these areas [50,11,33,13]. Such continuity suggests that contemporary ERC success may partly reflect the interaction between current funding structures and longer-term national strengths in knowledge production.

The study provides empirical support for the broader proposition that research governance can influence academic performance without determining it in a uniform or deterministic manner. The centralized French and decentralized Dutch models were both associated with substantial ERC success, but the pathways through which that success was expressed differed. The Netherlands

showed broader disciplinary distribution, faster publication growth, and a more interconnected collaborative structure. France demonstrated stronger concentration in particular research areas and greater institutional anchoring within its collaboration patterns.

The study offers a comparative framework that links governance arrangements, thematic specialization, publication performance, and scholarly networks. Its main contribution lies in demonstrating that research excellence is not produced through a single institutional formula. Different national systems can support internationally competitive scholarship while generating distinct patterns of disciplinary activity and collaboration. This perspective advances the discussion of the ERC's wider structural role in European science and provides a useful basis for future assessments of how national research strategies shape the conditions under which academic excellence develops.

CONCLUSION

This study compared the academic performance of European Research Council grant recipients in France and the Netherlands to examine how contrasting research governance structures relate to thematic diversity, publication activity, and scholarly collaboration. The findings show that both countries achieve substantial research success, but through different institutional pathways. The Dutch system demonstrated a broader distribution of projects across social sciences and humanities panels, higher publication output, faster publication growth, and more interconnected collaborative networks. The French system showed greater concentration in selected research areas and stronger institutional anchoring through major public research organizations. Collaboration was highly prevalent in both contexts, while international partnerships were associated with greater citation visibility and stronger field-weighted impact. These findings indicate that research excellence cannot be attributed to a single governance model. Rather, institutional structures appear to shape the ways in which specialization, productivity, and collaboration develop. Future research should examine post-grant performance, include multilingual and non-journal outputs, and combine bibliometric evidence with qualitative analysis to better understand how national research systems sustain excellence over time.

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