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11 September 2015

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Dear Dr Williams,

IMPLEMENTATION CONCERNS REGARDING THE RESEARCH OUTPUT POLICY OF 2015 PUBLISHED IN GOVERNMENT GAZETTE OF 11 MARCH

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) welcomes the mentioned policy released earlier in 2015, and values the emphasis placed on quality rather than quantity by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), to ensure that quality research will be subsidised.

ASSAf hosted the National Scholarly Editors Forum on the 9th of September, attended by 115 journal editors of DHET accredited journals. At the Forum the Research Output Policy was discussed as well as its implementation. There were two specific issues that pertain to the quality of journals that caused concern. The Forum requested ASSAf to raise and clarify the following issues with the Department:

1) Norwegian List: Norwegian Social Sciences Data Services List (NSD List)

This list currently contains 26 893 journal titles which are assigned certain weights as per the NSD List. Of these, 2081 are tagged as Level 2 (top rated) journals, 21 154 as Level 1. The remainder have either not been rated or considered.

- There are 111 South African journals included in the NSD List, all classified as Level 1.
- Of the 111, 85 are currently accredited by DHET. Of the 111 titles, 31 are already included in the Web of Science and 24 on the IBSS list.
- In total 45 SA journals – which are not on WoS nor on IBSS – appear on the NSD List.
- The result is that – if the NSD List is meant to be a substitute for the DHET accreditation process – its impact would be limited to these 45 titles and would leave around 180 SA journals unaffected.

In the work of the DHET Ministerial Committee on the revision of the funding framework great emphasis was placed on ensuring that any revision should address concerns about journal quality more effectively than previously.

There was a definite perception that the substantial increase in the quantity of South African journal publications since 2005 has come at the cost of a decline in quality. Within this discourse the Norwegian List seemed to offer a possible solution as it incorporates a qualitative dimension in its list (e.g. the fact that slightly more than 2000 journal titles are classified as Level 2 journals). As we have seen above, its adoption will have two very different consequences: (1) since not a single South African journal is rated at level 2 by the Norwegian list, it has NO impact on ensuring greater quality amongst SA journals; and (2) there is indeed now a much expanded list of "high quality" journals in which SA academics can publish and earn subsidy (and many of these journals are not listed in the Web of Science).

However, in a recent communication from a DHET official, it was stated that the complete list of journals of the NSD (all 26 000+ titles) is now recognised for subsidy purposes by the DHET. So it seems that the Norwegian list has not in fact been added because it introduces a much needed quality criterion. Its introduction simply expands the list of journals that qualify for subsidy purposes AND substantially so. And, ironically, only 45 SA journals are included in this list, which still excludes about 180 SA journals (if the purpose was an administrative one). We would like to request that the use of the Norwegian List be reconsidered, and that it not be considered for use in the future.

2) Criteria 5.10: South African journals which, in the opinion of the editor, comply with the following criteria may apply to the Department for inclusion in the List of accredited South African Journals:

(c) At least 75% of contributions published in the journal must emanate from multiple institutions

The issues regarding this criterion are as follows:

- a) What remains unclear is:
 - whether this calculation is to be by volume/issue;
 - would it includes non-subsidy attracting articles such as book reviews or statistical pieces on court cases;
 - would multiple authors of one article be counted separately or together for this purpose;
 - would it be strictly confined to the List of accredited South African Journals and exclude South African indexed journals in the accredited indexes i.e. WoS, IBSS, SCOPUS, SciELO SA, etc?
- b) Furthermore will paid and special issues be affected, where a group of multidisciplinary scholars from many departments and campuses from a single institution working on unique long-term projects? The conceptual critical mass generated by such projects will be lost as a scattering effect will occur as individual authors try to place their articles across a wider and perhaps lower impact range of journals that can absorb them. It can take a guest editor 2-3 years to compile a theme issue, perhaps involving writing and development workshops with prospective authors, conventional peer review, and other forms of evaluation, so this rule will have fractured the coherence of some special issues in preparation during 2015.
- c) It may negatively affect throughput from South African authors, delaying publication, and even delaying journal publication schedules as editors struggle to get the balance right. The implication for production schedules and citation indexing agencies like WoS and Scopus could be serious.

- d) Internationally published journals in the accredited indexes are not subject to this rule, so authors planning special issues may avoid publishing this material in South African Journals.
- e) Editors should rather accept submissions on scientific merit. Peer reviewers in a well-managed double blind peer reviewing system are unaware of the affiliation of an author, or his/her gender, race or name. This new criteria will have as unintended consequence that highly recommended contributions may not be published timeously or at all, not because of any inherent problem with the quality of the research or contribution but because other contributions from other authors from the same institution have also been highly recommended for publication by peer reviewers. Because a peer reviewer is selected for his/her specialised knowledge and expertise in the particular field, an individual peer reviewer seldom has any knowledge of other contributions currently being considered for publication by a particular journal. Application of this criteria will not enhance quality research publications.
- f) The numbers of papers that might get (quickly) published may well decrease, affecting universities' income and their local and international rankings.
- g) For journals that have a largely South African authorship, the effect of the new rule will be particularly disruptive. The disruption will be seriously compounded for journals that are published only once or twice annually. The intention of the new rule may have been to fracture the recurring 'incestuousness' of some local journals, but this can in most instances be addressed by the peer review of journals that is currently being carried out by ASSAf.
- h) What about disciplines that are offered by only a few institutions in the country, e.g. Veterinary Science? For local Veterinary journals it will be impossible to keep the contributions from one institution below 25%.

The Forum recommended that there are less disruptive ways of achieving the same result:

- a) Calculation of the ratio over a longer cycle, by volume, even perhaps over one or even two years.
- b) That DHET, through the evaluations by the ASSAf panels, rather engage with the quality of the content and then judge on the quality and determine whether the editorial integrity of a particular journal does justice to the ethos of knowledge production of the highest quality. This means that if a journal crosses the threshold of 75%, this would raise a red flag that would require it to be reviewed for possible exemption.

The objective of this criteria should rather be to encourage quality research, to discourage bad research and opportunistic submissions and publishing, and to persuade authors to publish in higher impact local and international journals.

On behalf of the Forum, ASSAf hereby requests consideration of these two issues and feedback on their implementation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Crewe', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Prof Robin Crewe
Chairperson: Committee of Scholarly Publications in South Africa