

Journal Reviewing and Editing: Institutional Support is Essential

This submission to institutions relevant to the Higher Education Sector in Australia has been coordinated by Associate Professor Martha Macintyre at the University of Melbourne on behalf of Australian editors of academic journals

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The focus of this submission is on the perverse incentives in the higher education sector in Australia that are limiting the voluntary inputs of reviewing and editorial services to academic journals at the same time that there is an increased requirement for academic publications. Among the measures that can be taken to address this are more direct recognition of reviewing and editing services as a part of academic roles.

We maintain that the professional service contributions of academics to journal production, notably in the form of editing and reviewing, should be more explicitly recognized and rewarded within the professional service requirements of academics across Australian universities. To help maintain the publication quality that Universities and the ARC expect and rely upon, research-active academic staff must be involved peer-review or editorial activities: Universities need to establish meaningful incentives to develop and maintain these kinds of professional service requirements. Inclusion of professional services to journals within the ERA framework is a key option to achieve this.

At a meeting of editors of Australian academic journals published by Wiley earlier this year, many people in attendance observed the increasing difficulty in finding people willing to undertake the tasks of journal editing and the peer review of submitted articles.

It is ironic that so much weight is given to peer-reviewed publication in prestigious journals when assessing academic performance, while the essential 'backroom' tasks of editing journals and reviewing articles are rarely

acknowledged as aspects of academic performance. These functions are crucial to the dissemination of Australian research.

There are several reasons for this trend in Australia – increased academic workloads and the casualisation of academic staff are two obvious ones. But there is one overarching factor for this trend – the exclusion of editing and assessing from the Excellence in Research in Australia assessment system. The critical issue here is the fact that (to quote from the website):

‘ERA outcomes inform the performance-based block funding that universities receive from Government to sustain excellence in research. This funding provides all our universities with a direct financial incentive to encourage and support world class research. ERA outcomes directly inform university funding under the Sustainable Research Excellence scheme.’

The ERA procedures effectively mean that certain research activities are rewarded while other academic activities are not; and that universities suffer financial consequences if their academic staff do not privilege the winning of large grants and publication of articles in prestigious, high quality journals over all other work. These journals have of course become prestigious precisely because of the hard work of successive editors, associate editors and reviewers which, for the most part, is unpaid.

The need to boost research outputs has, in most universities, been factored in to ‘Workload’ models that place a value upon work attributed to the institution, with little value allocated to other academic work. Increasingly teaching has been casualised and/or shifted to online systems that increase the time tenured and senior academics can spend on research and publication.

For some journals the submission rate from Australian authors has doubled since the introduction of the ERA – and with it the amount of time editors spend dealing with them. A higher rejection rate ‘counts’ in the international ranking of journals. For academics the publication of a Special Issue on a particular theme – especially if it reflects research output for an ARC grant, is deemed an achievement – while for editors the escalating difficulty of finding one reader who is prepared to evaluate the collection as a whole to see that it has integrity and thematic coherence is ignored. Special Issue submissions have escalated.

Most editors receive little or no personal remuneration and very little institutional support. They labour as editors because of their commitment to their discipline and in the spirit of collegiality. But this altruistic disposition is in decline in Australian universities as careers are almost exclusively dependent on a candidate’s ability to gain grants and publish (in peer reviewed journals).

As a result, it is becoming more difficult to enlist well-qualified reviewers. This problem both increases the time spent by editors on such tasks and it often means that the reviewers selected are not those most qualified to judge the value and originality of a submission.

It is harder to get people to take on the job of editing journals. We believe that this will reach crisis point if there is no value placed on this work within tertiary institutions and in the ERA assessment. Indeed two Australian-based journals that are considered extremely prestigious are already having great difficulty recruiting new editors.

Universities are unwilling to acknowledge this activity as part of ‘academic workload’ unless there is some acknowledgement within the ERA that this is an essential aspect of the production of high-quality research. Whereas in the

past some departments funded disciplinary journals and relieved editors of some other academic duties, institutions have increasingly narrowed the range of endeavours they support. Editing journals and reviewing manuscripts are critical components of the process of producing ‘outputs’ that are excellent and internationally recognised as such.

In the ERA evaluation of disciplines there is allowance for recognition and esteem associated with specific individual achievements – membership of learned academies, conferral of Nobel Prizes and the like. This sort of peer recognition is appropriate, but no Nobel Prize was won by an unpublished research work and the peers who reviewed, published and judged the work had to be people whose opinions mattered within the discipline. Some of the problems that editors face could be overcome if the ERA were to establish another criterion that recognised the standing of those involved in maintaining the standards of prestigious journals.

To address these issues, we make two key recommendations. First, there should be much more explicit requirement and recognition within Universities of the professional service requirements of academics. All academics engaged in publishing should also be involved in reviewing or similar activities, and Universities requiring staff to meet publication targets should also be setting professional service targets. Second, Universities need incentives to develop and maintain these professional service requirements. Inclusion of professional services to journals within the ERA framework is a key option to achieve this.

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Professor Paul Jensen, The University of Melbourne, *Australian Economic Review*

Professor Ian McDonald, The University of Melbourne, *Australian Economic Review*

Professor Ross Williams, The University of Melbourne, *Australian Economic Review*

Professor Lynne Parkinson, Central Queensland University *Australasian Journal on Ageing*

Professor John Rolfe, Central Queensland University, *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*

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