Rank and File: Assessing research quality in Australia

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Abstract

In this paper, the author describes recent developments in the assessment of research activity and publication in Australia. Of particular interest to readers will be the move to rank academic journals. EPAT received the highest possible ranking, however the process is far from complete. Some implications for the field, for this journal and particularly, for the educational foundations are discussed.

Keywords: higher education, research assessment, bibliometrics, journal ranking

Introduction

Educational research in Australia has been in constant flux for the last few years as two different national governments have attempted to develop higher education funding policy that will leverage research ‘quality’¹ and/or ‘excellence’.² Not only do the different approaches of these governments indicate that quality and excellence mean different things to different people but, in each case, the distinct message is that Australian research activity and output is somehow lacking or at least needs to improve to face the challenges of the future: climate change, increasing international competition, globalisation and terrorism, shifting world orders, technological advances, food shortages and ageing populations.

Forced into competition with these big ticket items, funding for educational research has become increasingly difficult to find; despite education’s foundational importance to each and every one of these issues. Historically the proportion of research funding directed to education relative to other disciplines has been extremely low in Australia and the discipline has suffered as a result. Under the current system, the amount of research income won by universities determines how much of the Commonwealth government funding cake they each receive through three block grants, including: the Institutional Grants Scheme (IGS), the Research Training Scheme (RTS) and the Research Infrastructure Block Grant (RIBG). These block grants are apportioned through a weighting system that calculates percentages across four domains: (1) research income from competitive grants, (2)
successful research student completions, (3) number of higher degree research student places, and (4) research publications (see Glaser & Laudel, 2007).

The current system has some problems, although as Goodyear (2008) notes it is transparent and universities can each see how their annual block grants were derived. Recent proposals to measure quality and excellence also have some potential benefits for educational research in that such exercises ‘can help identify excellent research where it is located and it can help areas that gain such external recognition argue for a bigger share of the cake’ (p. 8). This could be of benefit to education for educational research ‘usually gets the crumbs, irrespective of the quality of the work we do’ (Goodyear, 2008, p. 4). Not surprisingly however, there exists considerable resistance to the measurement of research quality and excellence in a field where comparison against the kind of work taking place in other disciplines is not at all straightforward. One could almost hear a collective sigh of relief once the 2007 election was decided and researchers could pretend the Howard Government’s ‘Research Quality Framework’ (RQF) was just a bad dream.

The RQF favoured senior researchers. It also threatened to further concentrate resources in already advantaged research clusters, and—given the emphasis on individual competition—encouraged the ‘performance’ of quality research activity, yet did not promise to deliver the conditions of possibility necessary for it: academic freedom, collegiality, collaboration and trust (Davies, 2005; Davies & Bansel, 2007). When in opposition Senator Kim Carr, the Shadow Minister for Industry, Innovation, Science and Research, roundly criticised the RQF and promised a fairer deal for Australian researchers. ‘Excellence in Research for Australia’ was the new Rudd government’s answer to the RQF. The ERA was announced in February this year and—subject to an open consultation process—is to be introduced quickly, although like the RAE in the UK, the results of the first round will not be used for the allocation of research block grants (Goodyear, 2008).

While the ERA has some substantial differences to the RQF, both assessment frameworks have sought to include research publications in the quality measurement process. This is a controversial shift from current practice guaranteed to cause continuing turbulence in the field. Under the current system, quantity is rewarded over quality. All peer-reviewed scholarly journal publications fitting the description of research (see DEEWR, 2008, p. 26) receive one ‘point’,3 regardless of where they are published. While the attempt to measure quality is controversial, the current system fails to recognise that some journals are much harder to publish in than others, or that an article that is accepted in a leading international journal with a high rejection rate may require much more time and effort in its conceptualisation, production and revision. This is a contentious issue particularly in an applied field like education where, in many cases, the theory/practice divide remains unresolved and questions over the theoretical versus empirical value of academic research and publication complicate the debate.

Since the RQF, almost every academic has become somewhat familiar with the notion of bibliometrics—even those in the arts, humanities and social sciences who responded quickly to reject the early move to use Thomson ISI impact factors as proxies for journal ranking. The ISI system privileged science-based research fields
and particular journals and is not considered a fair indicator of value for the diverse field of education. Results from the SORTI journal banding study were more well-received, although questions did arise as to whether a journal’s placement reflected readership (distribution) or quality (intellectual rigour and potential impact on the field). Nonetheless, SORTI appears to have informed the ERA’s proposed journal ranking index with tiers of A+ (Top 5%), A (next 15%), B (next 30%) and C (bottom 50%). Since the ERA was announced more than 17,000 journals have been ranked across 100 disciplines which, like the SORTI study, has resulted in a more inclusive and representative list of research outlets than could have been obtained through either the Thomson ISI or Scopus databases (see ARC, 2008, p. 11).

Of interest to readers of Educational Philosophy and Theory will be two key issues arising from the ERA journal ranking process: one is positive and the other distinctly negative. First, EPAT is ranked as an A+ journal. While some maintain that ranking journals ‘cannot be logically or ethically justified, has no utility and will lead to unjust and unpleasant outcomes for us all, with no benefits to any disciplines’ (White, 2008, p. 36), this is not necessarily the case. The educational foundations have been under siege for some time in Australia, as universities place increasing emphasis on teacher education and professional development as the ‘core business’ of faculties of education. The drive for competitive advantage and higher standards in schools has resulted in greater scrutiny of teacher quality and in turn, on the quality and relevance of teacher preparation. University teacher education programs are accused of being too abstract, theoretical and failing graduate students who are now expected to be able to ‘hit the ground running’—even though it is acknowledged in clinical medicine (for example) that the ‘expert’ practitioner takes years of experience in the field to develop. This attitude towards education as a field of study and as a profession betrays the deep assumption that teaching is but a mechanical art; something that one does not have to be particularly clever to do, nor have to think very deeply about. The assault on the educational foundations betrays similar ideas about what the study of education is for and how important it really is.

The good news is that if a philosophy of education journal such as EPAT is ranked in the highest band in the ERA, then this provides scholars in a field that has been at risk with a publishing avenue that is not only highly regarded by their peers, but one that will be appreciated by Faculty publication-counters as well. The bad news is that the Australian Bureau of Statistics has replaced the RFCD codes by FoR codes which has succeeded in carving all but one of the educational foundations from the education discipline represented substantively by Division 13 (see ABS, 2008). History and Philosophy of Education now sits with 2202 History and Philosophy of Specific Fields in Division 22: Philosophy and Religious Studies. Sociology of Education now sits with 1608 Sociology in Division 16: Studies in Human Society, while Educational Psychology appears to be represented in two divisions including Division 17, Psychology and Cognitive Sciences and 1303 Specialist Studies in Education (Division 13, Education).

As a result, the value of work published in Educational Philosophy and Theory may come to be judged by scholars in Philosophy and Religious Studies. The
implications of this are deeply troubling and may well negate any potential positive
effects from EPAT’s A+ ranking. As Goodyear (2008, p. 5) points out,

Some of the journals that are core to these subfields are not necessarily
rated very highly by their new ‘parent’ disciplines. Also, we can’t be sure
that the Research Assessment Committees evaluating work in other
divisions and clusters will apply criteria in the way that we would apply
them in Education. We should begin to get a sense of how this will map
out when assessment of the Humanities and Creative Arts cluster begins:
we’ll see how history and philosophy of education begin to be treated,
and we ought to be ready to act if we get a sense that justice is not being done.

Recently the Australian Association of Philosophy (AAP) recommended in a sub-
mission to the ERA that EPAT be downgraded from an A+ to a B ranked journal.
Just what expertise the AAP is drawing on to judge a journal which few of its
members read, subscribe to or write for is not made explicit in its submission. Nor
is there any justification for the decision in the AAP’s accompanying letter, which
roundly criticises the ERA process and the move to rank journals.

Whether such practices are intended to create space at the top for other journals
more relevant to scholars in philosophy and religious studies is a question that
philosophers in education are beginning to ask.

Scholars in the philosophy of education are specialists across at least two fields.
They not only need to have a solid grasp of philosophy, but they require deep
understanding of educational contexts, for it is those contexts in which their work
has purchase.

Papers published in Educational Philosophy and Theory engage with philosophical
ideas to grapple with current issues, ones which affect the educational experiences
and outcomes of children and young people for whom education represents perhaps
their only chance for a good life. The ideas and problems worked through in these
journals are frequently adopted and applied elsewhere. Journals in the educational
foundations are far from being repositories for academic indulgence.

I would add that this is not just an issue for philosophers, historians or sociolo-
gists of education. The cleaving of foundational sub-fields from education has
implications for the discipline as a whole and will further entrench the perception
that theory has little to do with practice, and that practice has little to do with
arcane intellectual pursuits which include the study of ethics, morality, philosophy,
politics, power, change, meaning and intent of education.

And that would be a tragedy.

Notes
1. This was the oft-repeated buzz-word of the last Education Minister in the Howard govern-
ment [1996–2007], the Hon. Julie Bishop MP.
2. The new mantra from the Rudd government.
3. The number of points accrued by a university affects their allocation through two block
grants, the Research Training Scheme (RTS) and the Institutional Grants Scheme (IGS).
5. RFCD stands for ‘Research Fields, Courses and Disciplines Classification’. FoR stands for ‘Field of Research’.

References


