

SAMS Task Team Report on the current Research Funding Model for Universities

In the not-so-distant past, researchers were supposed to enjoy problem solving and breaking new ground in research. Publishing aims were to make sure that one's results are true and properly refereed and to document these to inform current and future researchers about one's results. Now, unfortunately, different things such as promotions, tenures and financial incentives are influencing (particularly young) researchers to publish large numbers of papers as quickly as possible. Internationally, this situation has led to a huge increase in the number of research publications but not to an increase in the quality of research.

Failure of the current research subsidy policy

In South Africa, the system of subsidising all publications that appear on the DHET accredited list, aggravates the above problem.

At several universities the pressure to publish has become so intense that some lecturers tend to neglect their teaching duties in order to write large numbers of low quality papers, which are easily accepted for publication in "predatory journals" (see, for example, <http://www.assaf.co.za/osc/predatory-publishing>).

Post-graduate students are quite often taught to write similar papers and then they eventually obtain PhD degrees based on a number of inferior publications. Those students are led to believe that publishing such papers constitutes good research. In many instances even junior staff members lack proper induction into quality journals in their discipline. Tenure and promotion committees should give extra scrutiny to articles published in predatory journals, for many of them may include instances of research misconduct.

The DHET accredited list unfortunately still contains many predatory journals. Those journals in numerous instances publish papers online only, often without refereeing or editing the papers, but they charge huge author fees (1000 to 2000 USD!). Yet, some universities are willing to pay the author fees in order to get the DHET subsidy, and a percentage of the subsidy is, in some cases, shared with the authors. It is scandalous that huge amounts of tax payers' money are being wasted on inferior publications at a time when universities are experiencing a financial crisis (see <https://theconversation.com/african-academics-are-being-caught-in-the-predatory-journal-trap-48473>).

At many universities research performance evaluation, promotions and annual bonuses of academics are linked to the quantity, instead of the quality, of research outputs. Some universities prescribe the number of publications (divided by the number of co-authors) that staff members are expected to publish over a three- or five-year period. Such a publish- or-perish policy tends to completely ignore lecturers who devote their time to quality research *and* quality teaching.

Consequently, some devoted teachers and excellent researchers (especially those who participate in high level research with several international collaborators) are rated

by their institution as being “under-achievers”, because they do not publish the prescribed number of papers. This creates serious stress for honest academics who refuse to compromise on quality in teaching and research (see [https://theconversation.com/south-africas-universities-risk-becoming-bureaucratic-degree-factories-49756?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+November+2+2015+-+3734&utm_content=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+November+2+2015+-+3734+CID_405f8ce657fb3c57695085fa226af81a&utm_source=campaign_monitor_africa&utm_term=South%20Africas%20universities%20risk%20becoming%20bureaucratic%20degree%20factories\).](https://theconversation.com/south-africas-universities-risk-becoming-bureaucratic-degree-factories-49756?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+November+2+2015+-+3734&utm_content=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+November+2+2015+-+3734+CID_405f8ce657fb3c57695085fa226af81a&utm_source=campaign_monitor_africa&utm_term=South%20Africas%20universities%20risk%20becoming%20bureaucratic%20degree%20factories).)

Why suggested remedies for the current subsidy system will not succeed

The 2015 DHET Research Policy document appeals to institutions to “*safeguard against predatory journals whose main purpose is financial gain rather than the quality of research*”. Item 4.1 in the document states that “*institutions and academics must remember the importance of research integrity when submitting their claims and are urged to focus on quality research and not maximum accrual of subsidy funds*”. Item 4.6 suggests that “*institutions may consider establishing a Research Integrity Committee, which could be a Senate Committee that would primarily ensure institutional compliance with respect to such aspects as the conduct of researchers.*”

The proposed measures are unlikely to root out the ills of the current system. It is unrealistic to expect institutions that rely heavily on the revenue earned by low quality publications to do “self-policing”. At those institutions a Research Integrity Committee will have a very difficult task, since there are even senior staff members who publish low quality papers in low quality journals, even sometimes in predatory journals.

An attempt has been made to rid the DHET accredited list of predatory journals, by deleting those that appear on Jeffrey Beall’s list. However, there are still many dubious journals on the DHET accredited list, and each year many new journals are added, making it an impossible task to weed out all the disreputable ones.

There have been suggestions that metrics such as impact factors of journals should be taken into account. This will only worsen the problem, since most predatory journals display inflated or bogus impact factors provided by misleading metrics companies (see <https://scholarlyoa.com/other-pages/misleading-metrics/>).

Developing a new research funding policy

It is clear that the only way to curb the decline in the quality of research and teaching at our universities is **to completely stop awarding subsidies for publications**. As long as there are direct financial rewards for publishing papers the system will be abused. The current abuse is widespread and will not be stopped by simply appealing to the integrity of institutions or academics.

We need to find a new model for funding research that is based purely on research quality. The new model should provide no incentives for academics to waste their time publishing inferior papers. Institutions that have favoured quantity above quality will then have to completely rethink their policies.

The current model could be replaced by a new system of delivering research grants to the universities based on a departmental/school subject peer review rating system that measures the quality of research, for example, a system similar to the UK system REF (Research Excellence Framework) (see <http://www.ref.ac.uk> and <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/funding/>), which is in some sense comparable to the current NRF rating for individual researchers.

Certainly the current rating system of the NRF could be used to judge and rate the departments, faculties and hence the universities. This process would be based on expert peer reviews to assess the quality of research at higher education institutions. The current NRF rating system could be an integral part of this evaluation.

The UK model might provide the DHET/NRF with a good base for developing a new research funding policy, but this will, of course, have to be done for all disciplines, otherwise disagreements at universities between disciplines, as far as funding is concerned, will be inevitable.