

THE KING IS IN THE ALTOGETHER?



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Current pressures on university research, especially those due to the Research Assessment Exercise, enhance the importance of publishing in journals. This is occurring at a time when accessing journals has become increasingly expensive. In particular, current methods of accessing both print and electronic versions tends to emphasize the importance of the major publishers, who are thereby acquiring an increased influence over the journal publishing scene. This is an unsatisfactory situation which librarians must seek to change.

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Research Assessment Exercise

31 March 2001 was an important, indeed a critical deadline for institutions of Higher Education in the UK. It was the closing date for institutional submissions to the latest Research Assessment Exercise of the Higher Education Funding Councils. The content of institutional submissions will be analysed, subject by subject, by special teams over the next nine months with the results probably being announced just before Christmas. The research gradings, allocated as a result, will affect the funding of institutions in the following academic year and beyond. Indeed, the judgments arrived at may be semi-permanent, if the prediction that this will be the last iteration of the Research Assessment Exercise proves to be correct.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the exercise from the funding point of view. If we look first of all at the general picture, we can see from the figures below (*Table 1*) what is the overall impact of the exercise. I have chosen universities which get roughly the same amount of funding on account of teaching but whose funding on account of research differs very sharply. This difference is largely attributable to the enormous differences in the research gradings achieved across the board by the various institutions the last time the Exercise was held.

To look at a closer level of detail, it is also possible to show what might have been the effect on funding if a given department had done better or worse last time. (I say "might have been" because each institution can decide whether it distributes the funds it gets in an "echo" – as it is usually called – of how its grant was calculated by the Funding Council in the first place.)

Table 1. Research Assessment and University Finances

	Teaching	Research	Research/Total Funding (%)
Cambridge	£51m	£64m	56
De Montfort	£50m	£3m	6
Imperial	£45m	£56m	55
LJM	£44m	£2m	4
Luton	£19m	£103k	0.5
York	£17m	£12m	41

RAE and departmental finances

The research allocation of a department is calculated as follows.

Research Allocation = Volume x Quality Weight
(i.e. RAE grade achieved) x Unit of Resource

Thus (for example):

- if the grade achieved falls from 4 to 3a, research income falls by 33 per cent
- if the grade achieved rises from 4 to 5*, research incomes rises by 80 per cent.

The consequences of gaining or losing even a single grade are substantial. A gain of two grades is really a rags-to-riches story, while the loss of two grades will almost inevitably lead to redundancies.

Not surprisingly, the sway exercised over academic departments by the Research Assessment Exercise is as high now as at any previous time. At departmental level, individual scholars are pressed continuously about publication - what? how much? where? and by when? But the time scales of the RAE are such that the kind of long-term research commitment, which used to be devoted to a scholarly monograph, is now, all too often, an unaffordable, high-risk luxury. What if you do not complete in time? What if the publisher has to adjust cashflow by gently extending his publishing schedules - by pushing your magnum opus beyond the closing date for RAE submission? What if your book is a critical flop? The safer research option is undoubtedly to get a goodly number of articles into high impact factor journals. Their quality is guaranteed by peer review. Their actual usefulness may go largely untested because they are not usually reviewed after publication and no one knows how much they are read. Any question of financial value is bypassed because the subscriber buys a bundle

of content. They are a form of scholarly output ideally suited to the RAE. The exercise which purports to be assessing research is actually bringing considerable influence to bear on what research is done, how research is done, and how research is presented. In this set-up, the scholarly journal is king and the courtiers of academe have a vested interest in the king's alleged magic garments. What we must also acknowledge, at this point, is that the whole context of journal publication has already been significantly altered by the IT revolution, and the process of change is as yet far from over. I now want to comment on some aspects of this change process.

Recruiting the big battalions

Without in any way suggesting that there is some conspiracy along these lines, present developments currently favour the big battalions, the publishers with large lists, and they may well achieve an advantage through this that will be very difficult to haul back. Some of the advantage derives from the large scale of their operations because the development of technologically sophisticated forms of access requires major investment. Librarians are finding it convenient to compound this advantage. The clearest indicator of this in the UK can be found in the results to date of the work of the National Electronic Site Licence Initiative (NESLI) - for which I myself must take a share of the responsibility. Almost without exception, the deals struck have been reached with publishers having very large lists of titles. This picture is also supported by what has been happening in other major countries, where "going electronic" has mainly featured deals signed with the major players. And yet, as we know, large publishers are not uniquely typical of the industry. Out there, there is a massive tail of publishers: some

of them responsible for just one or two titles, some with high impact factors. In defence of the librarians, we can say that striking deals with publishers for electronic access has proved to be time-consuming and laborious. There have been so many details to settle; for example, period of subscription, access to back files, basis of charge, relation to print subscriptions, and their possible cancellation. The best way to justify this serious investment of time and effort is to secure a lot of access, a lot of titles, as the outcome. Hence, the logic of concentrating on the larger publishers. There is no way in which such a serious investment of effort could be justified for the sake of the very small number of titles produced by some publishers, even though these titles may be academically highly important.

Another interesting characteristic of recent major deals is that the big publishers have shown a willingness to provide more access in electronic form than the libraries are currently subscribing to in printed form. Typically, they will say that in return for a continuing commitment to subscribe to the present number of printed journals, a library can be given access to all that publisher's journals in electronic form, with no additional charge, or at worst, a much reduced one. So far as the library is concerned, the overall effect is to increase the number of electronic titles to which the library can claim to give access. However, the titles may not be the ones that are regarded as most important by the library or its clientele. Hence there is some danger that libraries will be surrendering once again to that insidious temptation, which they have fought hard to throw off in the printed environment, the "numbers game". Look how many volumes my library has! Look how many serials we take! Never mind whether they are the most appropriate ones. Can we look inside ourselves and say honestly that the numbers game is not a factor here at all?

Pressure from contracts

This contrast between the effectiveness of the current negotiating approach for the large publishers and the extreme difficulty, to put it no stronger, which stands in the way of applying it to the smaller publishers, is not simply a matter of observation. The large publishers have

pressed, often successfully, for the inclusion of three types of clause in the contracts they have sought to negotiate, and these clauses are likely to affect the situation significantly. One is to require a contract to last for more than one year - and to offer financial incentives to persuade libraries to go along with that. A second is to write in a provision for price increases well above the going rate of general inflation. A third is to require no cancellations of subscriptions to their journals during the period of the contract. There is, of course, no way in which libraries, in the UK at least, can secure annual increases in their budgets to cover regular above average inflation increases in price. If libraries are to honour their agreement not to cancel titles covered by a NESLI agreement, and do this within a cash-limited budget, then cancelling journals which lie outside the NESLI agreements is bound to emerge as a major option. Maybe the major effort, now being invested by libraries in reaching agreements with the big publishers, can establish a pattern which can subsequently be applied to the smaller publishers, with much less effort. This implies that the model can be scaled down satisfactorily - but only if libraries have managed to reserve enough financial resources to maintain subscriptions to those smaller publishers. Otherwise, we are saying that, in the electronic world, journal publishing is going to be increasingly the preserve of the big battalions, even though this is intrinsically contrary, in my opinion, not only to the historic evidence provided by the industry, but also to the thrust of the new technology which is driving change. Or, the other possibility is that the present complex negotiations, with which publishers and agents and purchaser libraries have all become engaged, actually represent a temporary blind alley, and that we must be on the lookout for new models of operation, perhaps opened up by new operators, which optimise the potentials inherent in the technology. I think we librarians ought to consider very carefully, to say the least, before we press on much further down our present path, and think not only on our own account, but on account of the stewardship responsibility which we clearly ought to be exercising, on behalf of academe as a whole, for the whole system of scholarly communication.

Use statistics

One of the key factors in this situation is that of use statistics. With the exception of those libraries where the journals collections are on closed access, there are really no use statistics of printed journals. In libraries we try to get round this. Perhaps we have signature slips on the covers – which prompts perverse users to go round signing cover slips to pretend there is greater use than there is. Perhaps we take records of the journal volumes and issues left on study desks – without ever being entirely clear what that means. Electronic systems, on the contrary, are ideally suited to gathering statistics. However, we are mostly in a situation where the use statistics are not gathered by libraries, but by the publishers themselves, or at best by subscription agents. They have the systems. They tell us what the systems can and cannot do. As always with statistics, the real story ought to be one of continuing refinement. That is really why statistics is an academic discipline and why we have, for example, a Royal Statistical Society. We ought to be well past the point where we think it is merely a question of collecting numbers, following which objective truths will inevitably emerge. Because of that, I think that a situation where the libraries, who are the customers, are as distanced as they are from the collection of statistics about the use of electronic journals cannot possibly be satisfactory from their point of view. I am certainly not suggesting that publishers are being dishonest in what they are telling us but they would not be human, if they did not make use of a reasonable opportunity to gild the lily. Which of us librarians can put a hand on heart and swear that in our institution we have never tried to do that? I also think that we are suffering from a serious lack of benchmark information. How many librarians have expressed surprise at the "high" amount of use of journal content recorded by electronic systems? All they are saying is that it is more, perhaps considerably more, than they expected. Since we have never had sound statistical information about journal use before, any surprise we may express now in the electronic age is of very little consequence. Until we have rather more experience and can start to make some comparisons, our expectations are really neither here nor there.

What this all amounts to is a developing situation, in which large publishers are exerting increasing pressure on libraries as to which electronic journals to take, what the conditions of access are and what the evidence of use is. This is certainly against the long-term interest of smaller publishers. I don't blame the larger publishers for this. They are in the business of marketing their journals and I do not regard "business" or "marketing" as dirty words. It may well also not be in the long-term interest of libraries and we libraries are the customers. I was about to add, "and the customer should be king". But since I am raising questions about the clothing of monarchs, you may think that implies that we librarians are naked in the market place.

Contradictory trends

There are two other issues I want to touch on briefly, before drawing these remarks to a close. The first is this. Although I have painted a scenario in which libraries are focusing their investment and their principal efforts on large deals with large publishers, there are other contradictory trends happening at the same time, some enthusiastically promoted by librarians. Let me mention three. One is that some journal publishers are offering libraries entirely free electronic access, where formerly they would have had to pay. A recent prominent example is the BMJ, to which free access is now to be allowed. Secondly, while academic libraries are negotiating deals, in which they agree to guarantee journal publishers price increases, which go well beyond the ordinary rate of inflation, they are also trying to promote the establishment of journals which will cut into the inflationary spiral, which they themselves are implicated in fomenting. I am thinking particularly of SPARC. I have to say, however, that while the idealism which lies behind SPARC is admirable, the rate of progress to date implies that SPARC will somehow have to expand much faster than it is doing, if it is to have a real impact on the situation, and I am not sure it has the resources to do that. Thirdly, there are the journal article electronic repositories whether subject-based or institutional. They, too, seem to be contradicting the trend being pursued by the

major commercial publishers. Their principal evangelists are calling for access to research results without payment of any kind by the user. They are promoting a model, in which there may inevitably have to be a recycling of some of the money currently spent by libraries on subscriptions – typically to fund the repositories themselves – but they also claim that real savings can be achieved if the free access electronic model can be made pervasive.

What is “publication”?

Electronic repositories, however, do already pose an important question of a very different kind, existing, as they currently do, alongside existing journals, whether printed or electronic, and it is a question to which, I believe, inadequate attention has been given. I mean the question of establishing prior publication. Our system of scholarly research has been built up over many years on a certain assumption about what publication means. Publication, in my view, constitutes an attempt by a scholar to present a definitive statement of his or her intellectual position, on a particular matter, at a given moment in time. Within this picture there has, it is true, also grown up a practice of presenting “discussion papers”, which usually represent ideas when they are in a less defined form. Nevertheless, if we want to investigate how a particular idea took shape, or if we want to establish who is owed the credit for a particular research finding, or if we want to determine whether a PhD thesis really is innovative or not, we need to know when a particular research finding was presented to the world as a definitive statement. At present, we seem to be stumbling our way into the era of research article repositories, and seeing these repositories expand without thinking of these questions. To add a further practical point of special relevance to my general argument, if the moment of appearance in an electronic repository precedes publication in a journal, what is then the status of the journal article itself? Does it really amount to a reprint? If we are thinking of an individual scholar, there is

a significant question to be settled. If we are thinking about one of the more competitive areas of natural science, in high energy physics or bioscience or medicine for example, we could be getting into the area of plagiarism and the contesting of intellectual property rights. Yet, currently, nobody appears to be addressing what I must insist is a fundamental question, which reaches right to the heart of our intellectual life and traditions.

Could the little boy have been deluded?

So there we are. About ten years ago, I addressed a UKSG conference and asked then, for different reasons, whether King Journal really had any clothes. Today, I suggest that we in academe have a system for the communication of research, which appears to be passing more out of our hands than ever, and with our active co-operation, when we have for so long been complaining that the terms of intellectual trade were already not to our satisfaction. We also have pricing pressures building up which look to me as though they cannot be sustained in the long term, including a serious threat to the journals of the smaller publishers. We are still a long way from getting any degree of control about how the use of research material is measured, and we are allowing fundamental questions about establishing and confirming the ownership of ideas to grow without being addressed. Do you wonder then that, ten years on, I am still asking whether King Journal really has any clothes? But what I also ask myself is this. In Hans Andersen's story, the little boy who first said that the king had no clothes proved to be right but supposing he had been the one who was labouring under an delusion? If that scenario is tenable, things at the court of King Journal may go on unchecked for the first decade of the new century, just as they did for the last decade of the old one. Perhaps UKSG might check up in 2010 to see whether this awkward little lad from Southampton is still standing in the crowd saying: “I insist. The King is in the altogether. He's as naked as the day that he was born.”