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What was wrong with Australia's journal ranking?

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Letter to the Editor

What was wrong with Australia's journal ranking?

Butler's (2011) letter concerning my analysis of journal ranking (Vanclay 2011) warrants a brief rejoinder, because it reflects the importance of consultation in the implementation of any evaluation of academic research. Unlike soldiers, university academics are not accustomed to taking orders without question, but thrive on evidence and debate, and the introduction of the ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) should have been more cognisant of this fact. I suspect that Butler and I sit at opposite ends of the same table of frustration: Butler as a consultant frustrated about poor implementation of her advice¹, and me as an assessee frustrated at the lack of consultation. The lack of communication is reflected in two observations by Butler (2011): that there has been a "rush by academics to analyse", and the fact that "many of the articles have minor errors in their understanding". It is also reflected in the frustration that led to the publication of my analysis (Vanclay 2011), despite my belief in performance appraisal and publication-based metrics.

Butler contends that my argument is undermined by three errors, but her view is contentious. (i) I acknowledge that it was imprecise to describe 'column one' FOR codes as 'primary' codes in my introduction to Table 1, but I did so deliberately for simplicity, to avoid a complicated description of the table of FOR codes, and because 80% of the 20712 journals listed in ERA 2010 are correctly categorised into their unique division by the 'column one' FOR code. A re-calculation based on pro-rata allocation to each of the possible FOR divisions does not substantively change Table 1: Divisions 07 Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences (with 1% of A* journals) and 12 Built Environment and Design (with 14% A* journals, down from 15%) both remain conspicuous outliers. Butler's comment about "only one journal" is incorrect and irrelevant because my Table 1 (Vanclay 2011, p.266) dealt with percentages, not counts. (ii) I deliberately excluded conferences from my analysis, because ERA considers conferences only within some divisions, and because of my contention that the conference rank is an inadequate indicator of article impact. (iii) I acknowledge that Scopus coverage varies from field to field, but remain unconvinced that poor coverage adequately explains the poor correlation between ERA rankings and other indicators of impact. I re-iterate my original observation from a targeted keyword search not restricted by FOR code: *"In both cases (0705 Forestry and 1203 Design), the two top journals carry more than half of the papers that are frequently cited (in the top 5% of the most-cited papers). In both cases, frequently cited papers tend to average about 37 citations/paper"*

¹Linda Butler confirmed this view in an email dated 26/9/11.

(Vanclay 2011, p. 269). There appears to be considerable similarity in citation patterns between these two fields, despite uneven coverage by Scopus. But these are minor quibbles, and are addressed only to ensure that the alleged errors do not detract from the main message: the adequacy and implications of journal rankings and the need for consultation.

In discussing the absence of A* journals amongst the forestry literature, Butler (2011) speculated that “*that those academics who participated in the process [may have] believed that most of the “best” forestry articles appeared in more general journals*”. This is not correct, and as forestry experts proposed several journals for A* ranking. However, the process was suboptimal and warrants comment. On 7 November 2007, the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE) sent the executive director of the Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) a request to assist in refining a draft ranking forestry journals which included 3 journals ranked A*. Six days later, on 13 November, this request was emailed by Dr Alan Brown (Fellow IFA, Fellow ATSE) to seven senior members (including the present author) of the IFA to solicit urgent input. The eight individuals (including Brown; 2 university academics, 2 non-university researchers, 4 retired individuals) could not reach consensus within the ten days before the ATSE deadline, so Brown’s response on 21 November included one journal (*Forest Ecology and Management*) unanimously supported as A*, and five additional journals nominated as A* with varying levels of support (Vanclay 2008). In hindsight, the IFA response to the ATSE request was probably insufficient, but insufficient because of inadequate information about the detail needed and the implications of the response, and because of the insufficient time allowed. The final journal list for ERA 2010 included no A* journals in 0705 Forestry, so it appears that bureaucrats and committees within the Australian Research Council downgraded the recommendations of ATSE and IFA without consultation. Ultimately, this quirk appears to have had little effect on the ranking of research teams, as forestry research at four universities was ranked at or above world standard, probably because of good benchmarking and citation analysis by ERA.

Unfortunately, the journal ranking continues to have detrimental consequences, despite its recent retraction by ERA (e.g., Bennett et al 2011, Martin 2011, Young et al 2011), as many academics remain under strong pressure to publish in (former) A* journals. As discussed, Forestry (0705) had no A* journals, and the two A* journals (*Applied and Environmental Microbiology* and *Conservation Biology*) next in the hierarchy (07 Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences) are of limited relevance to forestry, so this pressure towards A* journals becomes a pressure to publish in multidisciplinary journals, away from the primary forestry audience – a sad consequence of an inadequate (and now abandoned) journal ranking process.

The clear lesson from this sad era of ERA this is the need for adequate and genuine consultation, and careful consideration of possible consequences.

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