The Publication Collection and the Output Sub-Component of the Research Component of the FFM

Some Thoughts and Suggestions for Reform

The recently completed audit of the 1996 research publication collection and the resubmission exercise of the 1995 publication collection have raised a number of concerns. These have been expressed by the administrative staff involved, audit committee members, Heads of department and academic staff. They can be classified under four broad headings:

- the administrative complexity of the collection;
- the extent of the resources required both centrally in Research Admin and ACS and in Departments to collect, enter and verify the collection;
- the workload and other demands placed on the academic panel members required to audit the collection;
- concerns that the collection (and hence the Output Sub-Component of the FFM) is "rewarding" volume not quality, may be promoting inappropriate behaviour and does little to advance the University's mission or its aspiration to be a leading international university.

Overall I sense that there is general agreement in the University that a serious discussion of the Publication Collection and the way it is used in the FFM is warranted. Unfortunately, I also sense that there is little consensus on changes that might be made, particularly if administrative simplification is a goal. The following are some suggestions that may offer a way forward. Hopefully, they will at least help focus debate. Reference should also be made to Peter Johnson's report, A Report on the Resubmission of 1995 Publications and the Collection of 1996 Publications and the Notes of a Meeting of Members of The Publications Audit Subcommittee Held on 26 June 1997 both of which are attached to the Agenda for the July 10 Meeting of the Research Committee.

1. Review the UWA categories to ensure that all specifications are clear and as unambiguous as possible. While developments in the DEETYA collection should not be ignored, that collection will certainly not be increased from the current four categories and may be further decreased. Since the existing four categories are certainly ones that find general acceptance at UWA, the DEETYA collection is thus not a major constraint on us revising the specifications of the other categories of publications that we wish to collect for our own internal purposes. In the case of the DEETYA categories subdivision would be feasible as currently occurs for AI books.

2. Clarify the eligibility of staff and students. My expectation is that eligibility requirements for the DEETYA collection will be simplified to the year of publication and the existence of a by-line or other clear identification of the publication with the University claiming it. I would suggest that we adopt a similar requirement, namely that for a Department/Centre to claim a particular publication that Department/Centre must appear in the by-line or there must be some other clear identification of (possibly on) the publication with the claiming Department/Centre. Such a requirement would help ameliorate the problem of publications being simultaneously claimed by two departments. This would be possible if and only if both departments were mentioned on the by-line. Similarly members of staff holding joint appointments would contribute to the publication count of both departments if and only if both Departments featured in the by-line. In such circumstances there could be an automatic fractionation across the relevant departments with little risk of multiple reporting.

3. A more radical suggestion would be to remove fractionation completely and allow each participating department to claim the publication in full. While administratively attractive, I fear that such a proposal would be perceived as advantaging those disciplines in which collaborative research is a prominent feature and thus I doubt that its introduction would be politically acceptable. Nevertheless, it would be worth analysing the recent collection to see the effects.

4. Replace the full annual audit of all publications by an audit of a sample of publications from each department/centre with the final score of the department given by S(1-e), where S is the score over all publications and e is the error found in the sample. The appropriateness of the sample and how the sample is drawn from the full collection would merit further consideration but using the error detected in the sample in the FFM index would be a strong incentive to Departments to minimise clerical errors and to responsibly classify their publications.

5. Split the Publication part of the Output Sub-Component into two parts:
• one based, as now, on a weighted volume count (modified as in 4) above;

• a second based on a process in which criteria such as quality, impact and international dissemination are explicitly assessed.

6. How such a “quality and impact” component, henceforth denoted QIC, might be constructed and administered would need very careful consideration. One possible approach might be to request Departments to nominate a limited number of publications for inclusion, following assessment, in the QIC. A model of how this might work can be drawn from the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). In the RAE, departments nominate up to four pieces of work for nominated “research active” staff; the publications being published within the past four years of the RAE submission date.

7. The criteria that might be used in the QIC would need to be developed with wide consultation and would probably need to be discipline specific. To be manageable as many criteria as possible should be objective, such as publication in an ISI journal with a high impact factor. However, a more subjective “on merit” review would also need to be a feature. Since this is a significant aspect of our current system it may be possible to design a QIC in which this academic effort is redirected away from its current focus on “auditing compliance” to “quality assessing”. I suspect that under such circumstances the academic workload involved would be more acceptable.

8. A significant challenge to designing an effective QIC for UWA would be ensuring the number of publications nominated by Departments is kept manageable. Clear criteria for assessment would be a critical first step but probably not sufficient, particularly if the nomination of publications from earlier years was to be allowed. Since any nominated publications will also contribute to the “volume score”, the QIC should be seen as involving a bonus score. Thus two possible additional mechanisms aimed at controlling the number of publications involved might be:

• to allow publications to be nominated only once;

• to include a penalty for nominated publications that fail assessment.

The idea of a Quality and Impact Component (QIC) is probably the most significant of the suggestions sketched in this paper for reforming the Publication Collection. It is certainly one that addresses most directly the concerns that the current Output Sub-Component of the FFM is doing little to advance the University’s aspiration to be a leading international university. However, before even the idea of such a QIC can be seriously contemplated possible criteria and the relevant processes need to be refined and developed further. In addition, the weighting of the QIC in the total Output Component would need some consideration. This in turn would inevitably re-open the whole question of the weightings in the volume index. For example, the “quality bonus” implicit in the score for A1.1 books would seem more appropriate to the QIC. Before asking RAU and other people to undertake the necessary work and analysis, I would appreciate advice from Research Committees on the basic principle. Research Committees might then like to consider establishing a small Working Party to oversee further development of the idea.

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