Academics’ views on publishing refereed works: A content analysis

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Abstract. Survey research was carried out with academics (N=205), from a large regional Australian university, to explore their views about publishing or not publishing in refereed sources and their perceived worth of this activity. Several open-ended questions were included in the survey to elicit information about the factors that either encourage or discourage these academics from publishing. Additionally, questions were posed to allow the respondents to discuss ways that the University could further support them in their endeavour to produce at least some or more scholarly publications. The responses to these questions were content analysed to discover key categories and frequencies were calculated on the most salient categories. The results of this analysis are reported and comparisons are made on the responses of male and female academics. The implications of the results for higher educational practice are considered.

Keywords: academic output, gender, peer review, publish or perish issues, publishing

Introduction

In June 2004, Professor Gavin Brown, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, was interviewed by a journalist working for The Australian newspaper. Extracts from this interview that focused on academic research output were subsequently reported in the Higher Education Supplement of that print outlet. Professor Brown, as documented by Illing, commented that academics working at his institution were “overwhelmed by work, juggling teaching and administration with other demands” (2004, p. 37). In his interview, he surmised that his academic staff members differ markedly in their approach to scholarly tasks and are often reluctant to share their scholarship with others, and consequently not as “research active” as he would hope.

The term research active is a relatively recent addition to the vernacular and arguably is associated with the language used by the Australian federal government’s Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, hereafter) when describing and reporting on academic publishing output. The DEST has established strict guidelines for
reporting research activity, particularly publication activity, and academics are urged by their employers to meet these guidelines. Four publication types, namely, refereed conference papers, refereed journal articles, scholarly books, and scholarly book chapters, form the basis of judging whether or not an academic is research active. It is worth noting that some universities financially reward their research active staff and even list the publications achieved by individual staff members for public viewing and appraisal. Such a response is in contrast to earlier practice when publication was generally rewarded indirectly through other means.

Other countries have similar schemes to that described above. For instance, all universities in England report periodically their research output under the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and these data are used to rank universities in terms of output (Higher Education Funding Council For England 2004; O’Keefe 2005). It is worthy of noting that the RAE has extended the simple notion of counting publications to include a consideration of quality.

**Literature review**

The body of literature relating to publication output, including academics’ attitudes to such output, is relatively extensive; however, writings about these issues situated within an Australian, and more specifically a DEST-reporting, context are limited in number. The review of literature that follows will address in turn eight issues: the importance of publishing; difficulties inherent in writing for publication; confidence and self-efficacy; seniority; gender; research culture and other features of the work environment; time and time management; and, other contingencies.

Writers such as Greenwood (1998), Hourcade and Anderson (1998), Print and Hattie (1997), and Roth (2002) contend that engaging in research and publication is central to an academic’s life-world. Such a theme is clearly evident in the quotation from Sullivan (1996), “[p]ublication in recognised scholarly outlets is the prime indicator of academic worth, paving the way to rewards such as promotion, tenure, and research funding…scholarly publishing, in all its manifestations, remains both the bedrock and the currency of academic life” (p. 40). However, not all discussions about scholarly publishing support this line of argument. For example, Waddell (2002) suggests that peer reviewing can serve as a mechanism to restrict the number of