

The Impact of Journal Ranking Systems on the Discipline of English in Australia

Final Report for the Australian University Heads of English

Introduction

This report, for the Australian University Heads of English (AUHE), a peak body comprising academics from more than 30 universities, considers how journal rankings are being used by tertiary institutions and the impacts of those rankings on the discipline of English and on English academics. It shares the quantitative and qualitative findings from an online questionnaire that targeted academics at various career stages who teach and research in the discipline of English at all Australian universities. It ends with a series of recommendations that emerged from the data.

Findings

The questionnaire received 68 valid responses making it fairly representative of the experience of English academics in Australia. The respondents were aged between 30 and 70 years old, with an average of 48 years old and a median of 47 years. No respondent identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and only 16% identified as culturally and/or linguistically diverse (with a further 5% preferring not to answer this question). Overall, senior lecturers were the most represented group (45%) followed by associate professors (20%), professors (16%) and lecturers (14%).

The majority of respondents are in continuing full-time positions (86%), another 9% have full-time contracts, while 3% are on part-time contracts and 2% are sessional. The workload allocation is quite diverse though the conventional 40/40/20 workload models (40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% administration) was the most common (47%). While overall there were more women among the respondents (64%) than men (34%), men are more likely to occupy higher positions at universities.

The largest cohort of respondents came from the Group of Eight (GO8) universities (47%), followed by universities that are not members of any groupings (28%), while 11% work in organisations that are members of Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRUA), 8% in the New Generation Universities (NGU) and 6% in the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN). As some universities are members of multiple groupings, we also asked about location, and 30% of respondents came from regional universities.

The respondents represented a variety of research areas within the discipline of English and most respondents reported working across multiple subfields in English, with respondents identifying 42 disparate research areas.

Overall, the respondents are relatively familiar with journal ranking systems and their career implications, with 58% reporting that they are very or extremely familiar, and another 30% as moderately familiar. There is a degree of correlation between the position and level of familiarity with professors reporting the highest confidence in understanding the system.

The top five considerations impacting the choice of journal when publishing academic articles include: journal reputation within the field (selected by 93% of respondents), its audience, its thematic and methodological relevance, its ranking, and the peer review process.

Almost 60% of respondents reported their university had specific policies, guidelines or mandates about preferred publishing outlets, while 18% said no, and 22% weren't sure. GO8 universities are somewhat less likely to have specific policies, in contrast to the newer universities, especially regional institutions or those that are members of IRUA and NGU. There was some

correlation between the feeling of being impacted and the type of university, with 47% of respondents at the GO8 universities feeling personally impacted, in contrast to 50% of respondents from the ATN, 57% from the IRUA and 80% from the NGU. The percentage was also higher than the average among respondents from regional universities (58%), suggesting structural inequalities across the sector. The perception of negative impact of the institutional mandates is stronger among colleagues from less research-intensive universities, and the demands to comply are greater, especially those working in smaller regional or New Generation Universities.

Forty respondents provided more information about the various policies or mandates used at their university. The most commonly used policies stipulate the use of Scimago, Scopus Q1 or the defunct ERA ranking of journals. These policies vary from encouraged to required, and are often associated with clear rewards for doing so, including larger research workload allocations and enhanced chance of promotion. The second most reported policies employed an institutional journal ranking system, associated with questionable value and often with a lack of transparency. Such bespoke journal lists, which combine modified Scimago and Scopus rankings and other idiosyncratic management decisions, are seen to be the worst of both worlds. Fewer respondents mentioned a non-specified (or otherwise unclear) system of ranking journals, as well as a list of preferred book publishers and the fact that articles were preferred to books. Only one respondent referred to an open access policy.

These institutional policies and mandates were typically developed using top-down approaches, often with limited or no consultation, or with feedback ignored. Several respondents mentioned lack of transparency and the disciplinary bias against humanities, a concern associated with research assessments more broadly. These various policies or mandates have usually been developed by management with limited consultation. In some cases, consultation was ignored or dismissed, or there was no consultation at all. Only five respondents, all from unclassified, regional institutions, reported staff have been consulted.

Impacts

Respondents across the sector noted a range of negative impacts of journal rankings, most notably on career progression, local journals, and marginalised sub fields. The negative impact on local journals, publishing culture and “national literature” was noted by seven respondents. Several academics mentioned the “disastrous” impact on subfields, particularly new and emerging subfields, and “the unintended consequence of marginalising certain areas of research”. Colleagues working in Australian literary studies are particularly disadvantaged. Other respondents pointed out the inequity of the system and impact on staff (especially casual academics and ECRs).

We asked about implications for publishing or not publishing in the institution’s preferred outlets. While 53% of respondents reported being personally impacted by journal ranking systems, the gender breakdown shows more male (59%) than female (49%) academics feeling the impact, and more senior academics over junior.

The negative impact is most frequently felt at the promotion level, followed by workload allocation and the reputation of the individual researcher. Other issues mentioned included grant support, eligibility for sabbatical, and performance review in general.

Those respondents who elected to elaborate, reported being impacted by the journal ranking system in annual performance reviews, promotion applications and job interviews, usually with negative outcomes although two respondents had benefited from this model.

Respondents reported institutional expectations in relation to rankings had altered their research agendas. For many, those expectations to publish in high-ranking journals (however that is determined) influence the type of publishing outputs (prioritising journal articles over books) and journal choice (with a negative flow-on effect for sub-fields with no or few high-ranking journals). Some also reported resorting to changing subfields and publishing more interdisciplinary or collaborative work in order to comply with institutional

expectations. Within the discipline of English, scholars of Australian literary studies are particularly disadvantaged by these mandates as journals dedicated to investigating national literature are not well represented in metric-based lists.

So, is there a place for journal rankings and lists?

Some respondents see the value in having an informal discipline-based list of reputable journals, and suggested that the AUHE could conduct an independent benchmarking exercise or ranking, and develop their own list of reputable journals that members could reference in conversations with their institution. However, others acknowledge the creation of yet another ranking is perilous, and any such process would be fraught. When asked to nominate the top three journals in their field, the 67 respondents suggested 93 unique journal titles, with the top one appearing only 15 times across the three lists. This demonstrates how problematic the creation of lists is, particularly within a discipline as diverse as English.

While there may be some value in producing a discipline-specific journal ranking, it would perpetuate research assessment systems which “systematically marginalise knowledge from certain regions and subjects”.¹ Any development of a discipline-specific journal ranking would require a transparent process, with a clear methodology and quality criteria, and periodic review by a diverse panel of experts, possibly beyond the resource capacity of the AUHE. The AUHE could learn from the experiences of other disciplinary bodies who have been maintaining journals ranking list in Australia, such as the Australian Business Deans Council,² or the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA). APSA has been maintaining and regularly updating a journal ranking list since 2007 as a guide to publication strategies for its members, however, it has also been used internally at universities to evaluate research performance of individuals.³ The Australian Historical Association (AHA) debated for a number of years the possibility of having rankings only to abandon what turned out to be a difficult and divisive project.

Overall, the use of journal ranking is considered to be unnecessary and/or problematic, and associated with negative consequences on academic careers in relation to job interviews, annual performance reviews, workload allocations and promotion applications. It has also inhibited individual academic capacity to build academic careers from the subfields in which they have expertise. As a result, journal rankings have damaged fields, journals and research agendas as universities focus more on moving their way up research rankings, than questions of research quality and value. Finally, institutional journal rankings schemes vary enormously, as do the implications for staff subject to them, and such schemes have exacerbated existing inequalities within the tertiary frequently to the detriment of colleagues in smaller regional universities who are tasked with educating some of the most marginalised of Australian students.

1 See Chavarro & Rafols. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/10/30/research-assessments-based-on-journal-rankings-systematically-marginalise-knowledge-from-certain-regions-and-subjects/>; Chavarro, Diego and Tang, Puay and Rafols, Ismael, “Why Researchers Publish in Non-Mainstream Journals: Training, Knowledge Bridging and Gap-Filling” (July 29, 2017). *Research Policy*, 2017, SWPS 2016–22: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3014349>

2 <https://abdc.edu.au/research/abdc-journal-quality-list/>

3 See discussion in Agata Mrva-Montoya (2021): Strategic Monograph Publishing in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Australia, *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, DOI: 10.1080/24750158.2021.1943771, 4–5.

Recommendations

The AUHE has an important role to play in advocating for the discipline and supporting academics across in their various research endeavours. Our findings suggest that creating its own quality journal list would produce more problems than it solved. Instead, we recommend that the AUHE:

- provide explanatory information to members to help clear up uncertainties that surround the assessment processes and the value and pitfalls of different metrics being applied at universities in the context of the discipline of English
- publicly advocate to universities and the government for fair and rational processes of research assessment, perhaps developing its own sector-wide manifesto⁴
- issue research-informed statements about the limitations and effects of existing rankings models for the discipline of English in particular, to support the case for reform of institutional practices
- send clear guidance to universities about disciplinary traditions in English and range of journals and subfields and their diverse purposes and audiences, responsive to the broad range of values in the discipline
- raise awareness about the ways in which these rankings are operating in practice to disadvantage certain academics and exacerbate existing inequalities
- boost peer reviewing practices for research outputs and grant applications that provide clarity around questions of quality and value in support of the discipline
- set up a sector-wide mentoring system whereby senior academics in the field can offer guidance to more junior colleagues about how to craft strategic publishing plans, make informed choices about publishing venues, and best contextualise their publishing decisions in promotion and grant applications
- support local journals which have been particularly disadvantaged by the current operation of journal rankings schemas in Australia.

Conclusions

Many academics in the discipline of English working at Australian universities are expected to comply with institutional policies and mandates, which use various journal rankings as a proxy for quality, even though extensive research demonstrates such rankings are problematic when used to evaluate individual researchers, particularly in the humanities. We share the views of the majority of respondents who suggested that academics should be “trusted to choose [their] own publishing outlets, based on factors such as the audience and the reputation of the journal, instead of feeling coerced into publishing with journals that are not of [their] own choosing”. This project has undertaken broad and detailed consultation and the AUHE has the opportunity to respond to this mandate to advocate for the discipline.

Associate Professor Maggie Nolan, Australian Catholic University
Dr Agata Mrva-Montoya, The University of Sydney
Rebekah Ward, Western Sydney University

31 October 2022

4 See, for example, ‘The Leiden Manifesto’, <http://www.leidenmanifesto.org/> or the Declaration on Research Assessment DORA, ‘San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, <https://sfdora.org/read/>