

## The case for an “Excellence in Scholarship for Australia” initiative

ONLY those truly cryptozoic for all of 2010 could have missed the bustle and concern created by the Australian Commonwealth’s Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative (<http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm>). In common with other national research assessment exercises such as the RAE (UK) and PBRF (New Zealand), ERA is designed to assess research quality within the Australian higher education sector, identifying and rewarding those institutions and departments producing high-quality research. The linkages between achievement, recognition and reward have the potential to shape the research priorities and agendas of institutions and individual researchers.

My concern is with what ERA omits. Its focus on strict research leaves no place for writing textbooks, reviewing scientific papers, organizing conferences and conference proceedings, a wide range of editorial work (only service on the editorial boards of top journals counts), service on government committees and popular writing in many fields of science — all activities informed by research and contributing to a wider research culture in academia and the broader community. All fit the dictionary definition of scholarship, meaning “academic study or achievement; learning of a high level” (New Oxford American Dictionary). If scholarship distinct from research discovering new knowledge attracts no recognition, or if university administrations discourage staff from undertaking scholarship to concentrate effort on areas recognized with ERA, there is a danger that less scholarship will be done. The solution may be to persist with the narrow definition of research in place within the ERA and create a complementary scheme called “Excellence in Scholarship for Australia” (ESA) to embrace the important areas missing in the ERA.

Writing textbooks would be an important part of the new ESA. While textbooks do not generate new knowledge, they summarize and evaluate existing knowledge for students and for researchers reading outside their specialties. They are probably more widely read and influential than many research papers. In many cases, the blurring between instruction and research literature is revealed by citations to textbooks in journal articles. For example, a “cited reference search” in the Thomson Reuters Web of Science database in December 2010 for

Neil Campbell’s “Biology” textbook reveals over 300 citations to its different editions, despite the fact that it makes no claim to be other than an introductory textbook and does not cite its sources. Textbooks for more advanced undergraduates and coursework graduate students more commonly include reference lists and can also be highly cited — the different editions of Richard Primack’s conservation biology textbooks have attracted over 500 citations (Thomson Reuters Web of Science cited reference search, December 2010). My point is not that these works or other textbooks should be classified as research and evaluated in ERA. Rather, textbook writing should be explicitly recognized as a valuable academic activity within the proposed ESA.

Reviewing manuscripts is also an important scholarly activity and deserves a place within an ESA. Every manuscript submitted to a peer reviewed journal will normally generate two – three reviews and sometimes more. This creates a “reviewing debt” for all authors who submit a paper that can be quantified as “number of papers submitted  $\times$  3/no. of co-authors”. It is a debt that many are reluctant to pay because of the time involved and the lack of recognition. Therefore I suggest that any ESA should explicitly recognize the contribution made in reviewing manuscripts as an important scholarly activity.

Judging by the unsolicited calls for contributions to various national and international conferences that arrive far too frequently in my inbox, conferences remain popular and are an important part of scientific communication. All those who have served on a conference organizing committee will also agree that it is a large amount of work. A vote of thanks at a conference dinner is important recognition, but a small incentive overall. It is therefore appropriate that the proposed ESA should acknowledge the role played in organizing conferences at all levels.

Editing is integral to scientific publication and ERA recognizes this for researchers serving on the editorial boards of ERA A+ and A journals (approximately 20% of all journals). However, no recognition is given for serving on the editorial boards of the other 80% of peer reviewed journals, not to mention editing books or conference proceedings. These are all

important contributors to the dissemination and application of research findings. Broader recognition of editorial responsibilities in an ESA would cover the blind spot left in the current ERA.

Researchers may also often serve on committees or working parties advising the Commonwealth of State governments. Such work is presumably of considerable value, but also time-consuming and demanding. It is reasonable that recognition be accorded to it in an ESA.

Writing to newspapers and popular magazines may seem trivial, but it may well make a significant contribution to informing the public or a range of scientific issues. By according a place for such writing within an ESA, recogni-

tion may be given to those who promote science to the non-scientific community (who do largely pay the bills of the scientific community).

The ESA as described is intended to be complementary to the ERA, recognizing scholarship that, while not strictly research, does much to facilitate research and to disseminate research findings within the scientific and the general communities. Leaving broader scholarship unrecognized risks increasing proportions of university academics neglecting it in favour of pursuing activities recognized under the existing ERA. Ironically, fewer textbooks or conferences, slipshod editing and reviewing, and a reduction in publicity for research undermine the very goals the ERA intends to accomplish.

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