

ASSAf Report: A Strategic Approach to Research Publishing in South Africa

**Summary of findings: follow-up
actions, plans**

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ACADEMY OF SCIENCE OF SOUTH AFRICA

- Established in 1996; Statute in 2001; IAP, NASAC member
- Merit-based; independent; multi-disciplinary (incl. social/human sciences)
- Core role evidence-based policy advice, drawing on these features/strengths
- 294 elected Members; 13-member Council
- Funded DST/Parliament (Grant-in-Aid), U S National Academies (ASADI), etc
- * Reports on: 2006 Research Publishing; 2006 Small-scale agriculture; 2007 HIV/TB/Nutrition.....

SUMMARISED FINDINGS 1

The confirmation that the formal “research publishing system” (backbone of cumulative, global progress in scholarship and knowledge) will continue to depend critically on the integrity and functionality of the core “editorial discretion : peer review: appropriate citation” mechanism, even if necessary and appropriate adaptations are made in the electronic age.

SUMMARISED FINDINGS 2

Research publishing in South Africa is undertaken in good faith and with much personal effort and commitment by editors and their editorial boards, but is very fragile in that:

- infrequent, often irregular publication of thin issues is generally used to deal with a low supply of good papers
- a majority of the journals play only a tiny role in the world research publishing system, as judged by citation in the most extensive, multi-disciplinary, indexed database available;
- the “mixed bag” of quality and reputation in the DoE’s local accreditation list means the whole group is “tainted” in the eyes of key stakeholders: the accreditation of journal articles as “significant” research outputs by the DoE is a key step in a system of multiple stakeholders including the higher education institutions, science councils, DST, DoE, CHE/HEQC, NRF, NACI and scientometric analysts, but it has not been convergently validated in consultation with them.

SUMMARISED FINDINGS 3, 4

- The evolving “electronic age” comes with highly significant paradigm shifts and new opportunities and risks with which an intermediate country like South Africa must vigorously engage.
- Preceding studies, and especially the work included in this ASSAf Report, allows us to see how all participants in the system can collaboratively bring about a vast improvement in the quality and quantity of research done in South Africa that is published, and in a much more visible way. A multi-pronged approach is absolutely essential, embedded in international trends and efforts particularly to assist developing countries like ours.

Recommendation No 1

----- that all stakeholders in the South African research enterprise should support local/national research journals that actively seek to be of international quality.....through following

- best-practice in editorial discernment and peer review
- capitalising on technological innovations
- judiciously enriching content to promote coherence and value-adding functions
- providing the local scholarly community with opportunities for participating in the full range of scholarship-enhancing activities associated with the process of publishing original research outputs
- vigorously seeking financial sustainability from multiple income streams
- accepting systemic peer review and periodic audit which has a marked developmental focus.

Recommendation No 2

----- that both high-level (Departments of Education and of Science and Technology, CHE/HEQC, NACI and NRF) and wide-ranging (higher education institutions, science councils) discussions be held to design a robust, well-informed and accountable mechanism for the accreditation of research journals (and probably also of books and other outputs of scholarship), that will meet the different although often convergent requirements of the multiple stakeholders in the national system of innovation.

Recommendation No 3

----- that the proposed best-practice guidelines presented in Chapters 1 and 6 of this Report be widely discussed and formulated into a concise readable document, and then publicly adopted by editors and publishers throughout South Africa, especially those relating to effective peer review and wise and appropriate editorial discernment.

Recommendation No 4

-----that the quality assurance system now being put into place by the Council of Higher Education/Higher Education Quality Committee (CHE/HEQC) be used by that agency and by its partner higher education institutions to promote best-practice in publishing of original research work, and to emphasise and enhance the training function served by the whole exercise of publishing original papers in the peer-reviewed literature.

Recommendation No 5

----- that ASSAf be mandated..... to carry out external peer review and associated quality audit of all South African research journals in 5-year cycles, probably best done in relation to groups of titles sharing a particular broad disciplinary focus, in order to make recommendations for improved functioning of each journal in the national and international system.

Recommendation No 6

----- that the Department of Science and Technology takes responsibility for ensuring that Open Access initiatives are promoted to enhance the visibility of all South African research articles and to make them accessible to the entire international research community. Specifically:

- Supporting online, open access (“Gold route”) versions of South African research journals;
- a federation of institutional Open Access repositories, adhering to common standards, should be established (“Green route”), and national harvesting of South African Open Access repositories made available.

Recommendation No 7

-----that a consortium of agencies be asked by the Department of Science and Technology to form a virtual “national research publications information and research centre”, probably best overseen by the Academy of Science of South Africa, which will continuously gather and analyse information on South African journals as well as on publications in foreign journals emanating from authors working in this country.

Recommendation No 8

-----that a wide-ranging project be initiated by the national Department of Education and the provincial education authorities that will sharply increase the exposure of teachers, teachers-in-training and learners to local science journals and magazines that present the country's foremost scientific work in accessible form, and are effectively linked to the media.

Recommendation No 9

----- that the Department of Science and Technology should assume responsibility for seeing to it that the South African science/innovation community, including itself and other government agencies, becomes involved in international action to promote the rapid but evolutionary development of a non-commercial, expanded, diversified and more inclusive international listing and indexing system for research journals, including those published in developing countries, within the evolving electronic knowledge-disseminating and -archiving system.

Recommendation No 10

----- that the findings and recommendations contained in this Report be presented to key stakeholders in a series of consultative workshops, and that the outcomes and the impact of the publication of the Report be evaluated in three years time.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

- **Presentations to Ministers of Education and Science/Technology, etc; HESA; NACI**
- **Funding sought for implementation project**
- **ASSAf's Committee on Scholarly Publishing in S A constituted**
- **ASSAf's Scholarly Publishing Unit established**
- **National Scholarly Editors' Forum being established : draft terms of reference**

SECOND STUDY: SCHOLARLY BOOKS/CHAPTERS

- **Research output policy more troublesome than journals (DoE)**
- **National and international study begun**
- **2007 submissions studied**
- **Monographs and book chapters included**
- **Disciplinary variations**
- **Release likely in April 2008.**

QUALITY ASSURANCE

- **National Scholarly Editors' Forum mandate secured**
- **Discussion of draft code of best practice in editing and peer review - ? adoption in early 2008**
- **Discussion of draft criteria and processes for grouped peer review of S A journals by ASSAf Panels - ? First 2-5 reviews in 2008**

? NATIONAL OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING PLATFORM

- **Task team to be established to develop proposals for (subsidised) Open Access publishing model, business plan, etc**
- **Dual print-e publication mostly necessary**
- **International precedents, models**
- **Linked to quality assurance, accreditation**
- **Bandwidth, hardware issues addressed**
- **Report end 2008.**

SUMMARY OF ASSAf-LED PROJECT

- **Major Journals Report 2006; supported by two key depts.; ASSAf to oversee implementation**
- **State envisages a major-impact, low-cost intervention**
- **Study of books/book chapters to be completed in early 2008**
- **Editors' Forum to adopt best-practice code**
- **Peer review of discipline-grouped journals; recommendations, including accreditation and subsidised open access models**
- **State-supported, national Open Access publishing platform(s)**
- **Information/indexing system to be developed**

