

More than a 'publish or perish' dilemma: research funding and the creative arts at South African Universities



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In her article published in the February 25 to March 3 2011 Mail & Guardian, and carrying the title 'Publish or be damned', Charlotte Mbali observes how failure to produce a publication such as a journal article every annum is the greatest fear of many an academic. Such a scenario, she notes, may result in the offending academic being called to account for 'poor' performance and being denied promotion or leave.¹ In a context where universities depend on income from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for research outputs, and where an article in an accredited journal can raise as much as R120 000 for an institution, it is perhaps inevitable that a system which is intended to reward and encourage research productivity can also in fact serve as a device for punishing those who seem unproductive.

'Seem unproductive' needs qualification and explanation, however. If academics are expected to sustain research productivity, they are also required to produce a particular *type* of output. The DHET rewards articles from journals accredited on the South African Post-Secondary Education (SAPSE) list while also accrediting published conference proceedings, books and chapters in books. Leaving aside the question whether those academics who take on more undergraduate teaching than their colleagues should also be required to publish, the difficulty is that there are in fact some categories of scholarly activity that are totally excluded from the current system. Individuals producing outputs in fine art, music, theatre, dance, creative writing, film, television, design and architecture, unless there are textual analyses of those activities, are provided with no opportunities to have their work acknowledged. The outcome is a scenario in which academics who are highly productive in creative arts arenas, and who have acquired national and international reputations for the quality of their work, are not only prevented from generating research income for their institutions but may also appear as if they are not meeting requirements.

Happily, the DHET have now recognised the need to reward creative outputs and have established a Working Group to devise mechanisms and processes to make this possible. Appointed to chair this process with them, I have been involved in this initiative for the past year. An enormously challenging exercise, it has involved us in a large number of debates and considerations. In this article, I explore some of these challenges and debates, indicating briefly what systems and protocols the Working Group has thus far devised.

Should creative practices at universities be accredited?

It would need to be acknowledged in the first instance that, while many would view the current exclusion of creative practices from research funding as blatantly unfair, indeed iniquitous, one does nevertheless encounter some senior academics or administrators who are not persuaded of any need whatsoever to accredit such work. A frequent argument is that, rather than having their creative work itself remunerated and rewarded, practitioners should be producing publications about that creative work. Those mooted such views sometimes assume that, like experiments and tests that a natural scientist conducts in the laboratory as preparation for one or more journal articles, the creative output is not itself the product of research or investigative work but is instead merely data towards such an output. Alternatively, such arguments may be underpinned by assumptions that the objective of the creative output is simply 'self-expression'. The deduction drawn from this kind of generalisation is that, while it may have the potential to move the viewer and suggest depths of feeling or creativity on the part of its producer, the work cannot be seen to have intellectual content unless the artist/creator proves this

after the fact. Such views, whether stemming from confusion between creative practices and research in the natural sciences or misconstructions of art as unmediated emotional outpourings, clearly fail to recognise that the creative text is itself a discursive engagement operating within a disciplinary paradigm, and that it is not therefore a matter of it being invested with the capacity to signify intellectually only once it is explicated through a publication.

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Those mooted such arguments are commonly from outside the humanities and lack exposure to theories about the 'death of the author' – in other words how, in a framework influenced by post-modernist and poststructuralist ideas, it is widely acknowledged that meaningful interpretation of creative works normally involves invoking perspectives and ideas that were outside the intentions of their makers. Those academics and administrators are thus not normally aware that respectable journals do not generally welcome explications by creative artists of their own practices.

There are also some academics and university administrators who are more attuned to complexities and problems surrounding a practitioner's textual engagement with his/her own practice but who nevertheless also argue for publishing. Their argument is that the practitioner should produce writings about those working in related paradigms or about issues of relevance to their work. This too is a problematical perspective, however. Such a response overlooks the fact that producing written analysis is a very particular and specialist activity: art history and musicology, for example, are disciplines discrete from the arts practices that are their objects of focus precisely because the act of writing about creative work involves completely different cognitive processes to the act of producing such work. It actually makes as much sense to demand that a creative practitioner produce conventional outputs as it makes to demand that a conventional researcher produce creative outputs!

Scratch a little at the surface of such arguments and one will normally find that they are underpinned by an assumption that publications necessarily have a scholarly worth that exceeds creative outputs. The idea is implicitly that the academy will 'allow' the creative practitioner the opportunity to focus on his/her creative work

only if he/she commits to producing the more valued article as well.

Negotiating cognitive biases

Apart from the difficulty of dealing with individual misconceptions about creative practices, and, concomitantly, resistance towards recognising their scholarly value, rewarding such outputs is complicated by the fact that the current system is already infused and inflected by disciplinary inequities. Current subsidy criteria clearly favour the natural sciences over the humanities, for example. An academic in the natural sciences may well be able to produce numerous articles per annum, whether as a single author or co-author, enabling him or her to generate far more research subsidy than the individual in the humanities who may spend months on an article or chapter in a book. On one level, this can be explained simply by a lack of sufficient funding being accorded to outputs especially valued by academics working in the humanities – namely, books and book chapters. As it stands, a book – no matter its length or complexity – may generate a maximum of 5 units. While this may be unfair on the author who has been working on a single book for years, it is perhaps even more so in the case of contributors to edited collections. One of fifteen chapters in a book – even if it is 10 000 words and thus the equivalent of a substantial journal article – will be worth only one fifteenth of five units, i.e. 0.33 of a unit. Should the editor have decided on an even more comprehensive collection with twenty chapters, no matter the overall length of the book available subsidy for the individual contribution will be at only 0.25 of a unit. While the DHET is currently seeking to address an inequity such as this, also crucial are some fundamental epistemic differences between the natural sciences and the humanities – issues that cannot be solved quite so neatly.

John Muller explores how the two areas have their origins in the medieval university's division of the liberal arts into the Quadrivium (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music) and the Trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric).² Speaking about distinctions between 'hard' and 'soft' knowledge areas (that is, between knowledge areas which present the possibility of resolution as opposed to those which always face some level of incommensurability), he reveals how the natural sciences and humanities are characterised by a series of antithetical cultural and cognitive values. These enable those working within the former to be considerably more prolific in the arena of generating accredited publications than those working in the latter. For example, those in 'hard' disciplines share many formulations whereas 'soft' disciplines are characterised by distinct sets of knowledges. This means, for example, that those in 'hard' disciplines can more readily share lower-level teaching and also can readily achieve knowledge of core propositions and thus enter into the production of research more quickly.³ One is thus in a certain sense taking a funding model that is already more supportive of the natural sciences than the humanities and needing to stretch it to encompass disciplinary practices that are on the margins of the latter category.

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Further, in so doing, one needs to negotiate yet another tension or antithesis with medieval roots. As Muller notes, the first universities set up liberal knowledge against practical or mechanical knowledge, considering the latter outside the domain of the academy.⁴ While such prejudices were tempered through the acceptance of technology into the university in the seventeenth century, this history continues to pervade understandings of appropriate kinds of academic activities and, for some,

creative practices thus seem somehow antithetical rather than intrinsic to the academic project. In a sense, processes for accrediting the creative arts thus have to negotiate a double 'fault line', to use a term coined by Muller. Disadvantaged by a system which favours 'hard' over 'soft' forms of cognitive knowledge, their exclusion from funding structures has been affected simultaneously through a favouring of 'pure' over 'applied' knowledge.

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Despite these inherited biases, a number of universities have recognised that one cannot reasonably exclude creative practitioners from funding while simultaneously including creative arts subjects in their offerings. Devising their own criteria and processes for making such awards, they use a principle of cross-funding to enable the requisite monies to become available.⁵ But while institutions

are to be commended for taking such steps, these should be regarded as only a stop-gap measure to negotiate an unfair system. Achieving funding through cross-subsidy is not quite the same as receiving a percentage of research earnings, and it places creative practitioners at a disadvantage. In times of financial pressure, it is normally those who fail to generate earnings whose funding is first delimited or cut. Further, the existence of such a system means that, when it comes to making appointments, those who focus exclusively on creative research (and who are thus not likely to generate research monies for their institution) may well be regarded as less promising appointees than individuals who publish – a confusion of priorities that is at odds with the achievement of scholarly excellence.

Ways forward

To enable a way forward, the DHET established *Terms of Reference*. These gave the Working Group ideas about what was expected of it but which granted it agency to include some forms of creative practice which the DHET had overlooked. Thus, along with focusing on areas of output that had been identified as being of relevance, the Working Group identified one which the DHET had suggested be excluded (Literary Arts) as well as a couple of others that were simply not mentioned at all (Architecture, Film/Television). Realising that it would need to develop criteria and guidance for different kinds of creative practices separately, although obviously unite them as part of a single overall process, the Working Group settled on six categories of creative output: Fine Arts; Music; Theatre and Dance; Literary Arts; Design and Architecture; Film and Television. Within these categories, different types of output were identified – the aim being to be as inclusive as possible. Hence, for example, the Fine Arts category encompasses not only the making of art but also two other activities currently excluded from funding curatorial work and the production of exhibition catalogues.

The *Terms of Reference* carry the following title: 'Establishment of a Working Group on a System towards the Recognition and Reward of Outputs from the Creative Arts, Performing Arts, Patents and Artefacts at Public Higher Education Institutions in South Africa'. But at the first meeting of the Working Group it was agreed that concerns surrounding patents were entirely outside the frames of reference of the group as well as different in substance to those informing creative practices, and that it would, therefore, be counterproductive to endeavour to resolve any debates about them within the process at hand. To manage questions around Artefacts, a sub-group was appointed. The idea was that the group would develop

criteria on its own but would nevertheless operate concurrently with the Working Group.

As a Working Group, we realised quickly that we would need to be pragmatic and devise a system that would be straightforward as well as cost-efficient to manage. The DHET does not itself have a body of staff with training in the creative arts specifically and who would be equipped to make discipline-based decisions about submissions, and nor indeed do research offices at universities. More crucially, there was no guarantee of any additional money being made available for this initiative in the long term: not only would monies for creative outputs thus need to be drawn from the same funding pool as that being used to reward publications but also submissions would need to be managed without additional people being employed to handle creative practices specifically.

We agreed on one principle early in our discussions: the primary assessors of creative submissions and those who would decide on their relative worthiness would need to be the peers of applicants. In other words, in the same way that all publications that receive funding have been subject to a peer-review process, creative outputs could only be assessed appropriately by those with specialist knowledge of the disciplinary frameworks within which applicants would be working. Using the principle of peer review as its starting point, the Working Group devised a two-tiered system. Each submitted output would in the first instance be subject to a qualitative review – one in which peer reviewers would focus on assessing its value in light of such fundamentals as its contribution to knowledge or understanding within the field or discipline. But a second tier of assessment would also be necessary. In the same way that one would expect a book to be awarded considerably more monies than an article because the former is normally a considerably larger project than the latter, one would need to differentiate between the scale of different kinds of creative outputs: a fine art work shown within a group exhibition is clearly a smaller output than an entire exhibition of original artworks, for example, and a short story is clearly smaller than a novel. Thus once an output had been judged worthy of accreditation and support, it would need also to be ranked according to its scope and complexity. A five-tier scale was chosen (with a single unit defining the lowest level of funding and a rank of '5' designating the highest), the decision being that this was the most appropriate range to differentiate between the various small, medium and large outputs one might expect to be produced within the different creative fields. Members of the Working Group then drew up tables in which criteria were identified for the first stage of peer review in the different fields as well as guidelines showing how different kinds of outputs might be ranked on the tier system during the second stage of review.

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The first stage of the process – the assessment whether or not an output should be accredited – is the more important of the two processes. But while arriving at criteria for defining which kinds of outputs should be accredited was a relatively uncomplicated process, establishing protocols for ranking outputs according to their scope and complexity proved far more difficult. The latter process calls for an opinion about quantity, about size: but scale cannot be defined in literal terms because physical size (in the visual arts) or duration (in the performing arts) is not itself an indicator of the relative complexity or scope of a project. What this

means, in effect, is that qualitative criteria must necessarily inform judgements about quantity. In the area of Fine Art, for example, a one-person exhibition of original work may fetch between 3 and 5 units. An exhibition which qualifies for 3 units is defined simply as “a one-person exhibition/installation”⁶ whereas one deemed eligible for 5 units of funding is described as follows:

- One-person exhibition/installation that is demonstrated to be especially substantive and which makes evident its discursive engagement. Additionally, the exhibition/installation
EITHER
- travels to at least two venues. It can be demonstrated that this travel has meant that the artist has re-conceptualised the exhibition in accordance with the demands of the new contexts.
OR
- can be demonstrated to have involved the artist in a significant number of lectures, colloquia or other engagements of a scholarly nature.

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While it is a straightforward process to identify whether or not an exhibition has travelled or involved the artist in lectures or colloquia, it is less clear-cut – and requires disciplinary expertise that is *qualitative* rather than quantitative – to define whether an exhibition could be termed ‘substantive’ or to reveal how it makes evident its discursive engagement.

The idea in the system is that peer reviewers will make recommendations that will be managed by research offices prior to their submission to the DHET, and that a committee comprised of representatives from the various disciplines will review the recommendations and will check them for appropriateness and consistency prior to any awards being made. In summary, then, a system has been devised which,

- firstly, enables those within the disciplines concerned to make assessments according to their specialist knowledge and which,
- secondly, has sufficient rigour as well as checks and balances to ensure that the production of creative arts outputs is by no means an easier route to achieving subsidy than producing publications.

Debates

The Working Group has preferred to side-step an area of debate where one would probably never be able to achieve consensus. Contention whether creative outputs *are* research, are an *equivalent* to research, or are a valid form of output which entails disciplinary knowledge but which *should not be labelled* research invariably arise when the matter of research funding for the creative arts is raised. Such debates can become not simply heated but also circular, and they have a propensity to end up being ultimately about terminology that is being deployed rather than being in fact substantive in their implications. In order to prevent the creation of a funding system being scuppered by a debate that is ultimately irrelevant, it seemed productive to try to create possibilities for different conceptions of the connection

between conventional research and creative outputs to be accommodated rather than to insist on a very specific relation between the two.

A debate that arose in an early meeting by the Working Group focused on commissioned artworks as well as works being marketed through commercial galleries. The current DHET policy is to exclude publications of commissioned work largely because they have not been subject to a peer-review system which would guarantee that they make an original contribution to knowledge. But this creates a difficulty in regard to fine art made for commercial galleries art which may well make as much of a contribution to the field as that shown in non-commercial galleries. Likewise, artworks that are commissioned are also often ground-breaking, and commissions are in fact often linked to competitions. Further, if one excludes examples of fine art that are in one way or another linked to the commercial world, one would need to be consistent by doing the same for the various other disciplines or fields with which we are dealing. What, then, might one do in the case of design work or indeed architecture, where tenders and a commercial dimension will be almost inevitable? And what about theatre and music performances which charge for entry? The decision made ultimately is that any cognisance being accorded to the fact that a work might be in some way 'commercial' or 'commissioned' would simply be obstructive and unfair.

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Another debate which emerged is whether the stature and reputation of the venue hosting the creative output should not be seen as a measure of its standing or weight. But while it might be tempting to privilege New York's Museum of Modern Art or Carnegie Hall over little-known local venues, we felt that one should be careful not to exclude high-level creative events that necessarily take place outside of conventional arts venues – site-specific art installations, for example. Concerned also about Eurocentric biases which might underpin systems which attribute value according to specific locales, it was decided ultimately that it is the work itself and not the venue where it is placed (or its publisher in the case of musical scores and literary arts) which should be assessed. While a peer reviewer would be at liberty to cite the venue (or publisher) as supporting evidence for the value of an output, the primary task would be to show that the work itself has merit.

Questions were raised about the profitability of some creative practices and the implications of this. But one should remember that the system is not seeking to reward creative practitioners themselves but rather the universities who employ them, and that the DHET does not seek to play a role in defining how institutions deploy the research monies they are awarded. It is thus up to the individual university rather than the DHET (or indeed the policy) to decide whether or not it would want to limit support given to creative practitioners in its employ who are able to use their creative practice to generate additional income and whether or not it should focus instead on providing research support to the majority who spend considerably more on their creative practice than they are able to earn from it.

Conclusion

These are just a handful of the many debates which informed our deliberations as a Working Group or which were raised during consultations with the sector which have been taking place at a regional level. At the time of writing, one further regional meeting (in Gauteng) still needs to take place and we will then begin the work of actually drafting the policy. Once this is done, processes of ratifying and making amendments to the recommendations may well take another couple of years but, by 2013, we should have available a policy that is operational. It may be slightly rough around the edges in its early stages, but it will surely be one which can be teased into shape over the years. The important point is that its primary objective – the establishment of a funding system that will allow the contribution of creative practitioners to the academic project to be recognised and rewarded – will soon be realised.

NOTES

- 1 Charlotte Mballi, 'Publish or be damned', Mail & Guardian, 'Getting Ahead' section, p. 1.
- 2 John Muller, 'In search of coherence: A conceptual guide to curriculum planning for comprehensive universities', Report prepared for the SANTED Project, Centre for Education Policy Development, University of Cape Town, January 2008. My thanks to Chrissie Boughey, Dean of Teaching and Learning at Rhodes University, for providing me with a copy of this report.
- 3 See Muller, 'In search of coherence', pp. 10-15.
- 4 Muller, 'In search of coherence', p. 3.
- 5 Universities differ in the principles they deploy to support academics for their research. Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town work on the principle of awarding grants for motivated projects, normally basing these not only on the quality of motivations but on prior productivity of the academics concerned. Other South African institutions provide academics with a set percentage of research monies per publication unit they have generated for the institution.
- 6 Please nevertheless note that, if it is being ranked, it will obviously have already been judged to have met general criteria for accreditation at the first stage of peer review. These include the following two crucial criteria: 'Work must generate new knowledge or understanding'; 'Work must have contemporary relevance'.