

HESA OFFICE COMMENTARY DOCUMENT

Amended version of the *Policy and Procedures for Measurement of Research Output of Public Higher Education Institutions 2003*:
1 February 2013. (Government Gazette no. 36102).

These amended regulations come out of the experiences of the Department and the universities with the original *Policy & Procedures*, and are designed to improve the reliability and efficiency of the annual publication count. They are also the result of extended pressure on the Department to grant more substantial recognition to book publications, pressure that has come from both their expert Panel, and from the sector more broadly, notably in the form of the Consensus Panel Report published by ASSAf in 2009¹. Consequently the most significant change in the *Policy & Procedures* is the raised unit value for book-based publications. The discussion that follows will briefly review the policy for assessing journal, book and conference outputs, highlighting the changes. It will comment along the way on some implications for reporting institutions that the policy does not fully clarify.

It is first worth noting that the Department has finally formally recognised *electronic publications* as a bona fide form of research output, and these will be recognised for assessment provided that they fit the criteria for the publication category in question – appearance on an approved list for journals and conference proceedings, evidence of pre-publication peer review, and so on.

Revised unit values

Approved conference publication	0.5 units
Approved book chapter	1 unit
Approved book up to 60 pgs	2 units
Approved book up to 120 pgs	4 units
Approved book up to 180 pgs	6 units
Approved book up to 240 pgs	8 units
Approved book 300 pgs+	10 units

There are two points to note. The first is that this is a dramatic increase for a substantial book. Secondly, this new tally combines a unit allocation per output irrespective of page length (1 chapter = 1 unit) and a per page allocation. What the Department will allocate if the book, for example, contains 8 chapters (8 units) but is only 180 pages long (6 units) is unclear.

¹ASSAf (2009). *Scholarly books: their production, use, and evaluation in South Africa today*. Pretoria: ASSAf.

Revised procedures for journals

- On or before 31 January every year the Department will release the approved journal lists for the count. This includes both the international lists and the list of approved SA journals;
- The SA list will now be considered 'developmental', that is, journals can only be listed there for 5 years, during which they are expected to apply for accreditation to the international lists. If international accreditation does not occur within 5 years, they will be removed from the SA list for 2 years, after which they will again be eligible to re-apply for a further 5 year period;
- Conditions for accreditation have been tightened up. The main conditions are:
 - Most articles must come from outside one institution;
 - Most editorial board members must come from outside one institution;
 - Most of the journal distribution must be outside one institution.

The Department will conduct periodic checks for compliance. In addition, anyone else can report non-compliance to the Department. If the journal is found to be in breach, it will be removed from the list and the reason publicised.

It is clear the department has decided to act against a minor trend, noted before by CREST and ASSAf, for some SA journals to be little more than parochial in-house publications. These will no longer receive subsidy.

Revised procedures for books

Most of the existing procedures remain in place, but the following should be noted:

- In response to lobbying from the sector, the Department here concedes that it 'may' develop a list of reputable publishers, which will be communicated to institutions 'in advance'. The difficulty with a blanket accreditation of publishers is that there is such variability not only between publishers but within their different sections, sometimes varying from book to book. Nevertheless, a streamlining of the system is necessary as output numbers increase, as they are doing steadily;
- A new requirement for every book-based publication is that the author must write a justification of up to 500 words which describes the methodology and the contribution the output makes to scholarship. This must be included with the submission of the hard copy;
- If the book is a second or further edition, the book must be at least 50% new work, and this must be certified by the institution's auditors. This is the only book-based output requiring audit, and how practicable it will be remains to be seen. Most institutions complete the journal count first, and then do the books. The auditors may have to return a second time unless the institution fast-tracked the second edition submissions. It will also be very difficult for an auditor to exercise the kind of discretionary judgment this task will require.

Revised procedures for conference proceedings

These are largely unchanged. The approved list of international and local conference proceedings will be sent to institutions on or before 31 January, but institutions may still submit outputs in unaccredited proceedings for consideration by the expert Panel.

Final comment: the main changes have thus to do with the unit allocations for books; and the tightening up of procedures for local journal accreditation. The main criterion for acceptability for subsidy purposes remains '*clear and unambiguous evidence*' of *pre-publication peer review*. Both the Department and the Panel recognise that this requirement leads to an under-count of scholarly books where, for one or other reason – where the publisher has given an ambiguous statement on peer review or, which is unfortunately common, a non-response from large and busy publishers who can simply not be bothered with annual requests for peer review. This includes some of the most prestigious publishers. Nevertheless, these revisions do mark a step forward in the procedures for the annual output count, even if they are not likely to lessen the administrative burden on Research Offices in the short run.

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