



## The UKZN Griot. Of Quotas and Science

### BY:

Keyan G Tomaselli\*

Government (mis)communication causing panic and raising stress levels is the subject of this column. Weather and earthquake forecasters in some countries are subject to imprisonment for causing alarm and despondency if they get their predictions wrong. Employees at the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should be subject to the same chastisements. Thanks to poorly written legislation, wrong information communicated by a member of the Department, and the varying assumptions made by a number of university research offices, for a memorable March and April editors, publishers and research managers chased their tails. All kinds of directives were offered by different institutions on a matter that is going to have profound effect on the DHET publication incentive system.

This story relates to new DHET rules issued in mid-March. One of the new rules in question is the 75:25% asymmetry. Previously, an accredited journal was permitted to publish 50% of its articles in a single volume from the same university; from 2016 it's 25%. It was initially assumed by some that this new rule would be applied retrospectively, even backdated to 2014. However, was the asymmetrical calculation to be by volume, by single issues, by page lengths, by numbers of authors, would it include ISI and IBSS journals published elsewhere? No-one knew. So the rumours grew, with some journals seized in panic. I asked a few questions and contacted a number of university research divisions, while publishers tried to get clarity from the horse's mouth. And, unlike Home Affairs, DHET does reply – but in contradictory increments.

Here's the problem: Basically, if the 25% is applied per issue number (rather than volume), this will seriously discourage authors at large universities from publishing as South African journals will be required to limit their selection to no more than 3.2 authors from the same institution where eight articles are the norm per number. This may not be a problem where a small university with fewer authors is concerned, but it will seriously affect mega multi-campus institutions that have large or multiple departments where more people are publishing in the same disciplines.

The Law of Unintended Consequences means that the new rules:

- Will put paid to special issues where a group of even multidisciplinary scholars from many departments and campuses from a single institution like UKZN working on unique long- term projects are concerned. The conceptual critical mass generated by such projects will be lost as a scattering effect will occur as individual authors try to place their articles across a wider and perhaps lower impact range of journals that can absorb them. It can take a guest editor two to three years to compile a theme issue, perhaps involving writing and development workshops with prospective authors, conventional peer review, and other forms of evaluation.
- Will create a knock-on effect which could delay publication of single general articles as editors of South African journals juggle multiple incoming papers from specific institutions across a number of issues over a longer period of time so as not to fall foul of the new 25% rule. Or, editors might horse trade articles between journals.
- Will result in overseas journals simply not bothering with this lottery if it applies to them also. Why should they?
- Will create a situation in which editors who should be accepting submissions on scientific merit being now required to act as gatekeepers for DHET's quota system.
- Will mean the numbers of papers that might get (quickly) published may well decrease, affecting universities' bottom lines.
- Will be particularly disruptive for journals which have a largely South African authorship. Obviously, the intention is to fracture the recurring incestuousness of so many local journals. But this new rule also indicates a residual positivist ideology that assumes that 'quality' can be best ensured by the imposition of quotas. We all saw what happened to the Proteas in the Cricket World Cup when this kind of logic was applied.
- May have the effect of yet more journals being set up and applying for accreditation, thus spreading the risk for authors. However, in some disciplines, as is suggested by a recent Research Letter published in the *SA Journal of Science* and in ASSAF journal evaluations, some disciplines are oversupplied with journals. Some titles might now disappear as they may be unable to secure sufficient submissions to satisfy the 75:25% rule.
- May, if the 75:25% rule applies, negatively affect throughput from South African authors, delaying publication, even delaying journal publication schedules as editors struggle to get the balance right. The implication for production schedules and indexing agencies could be serious.

There are many less disruptive ways of achieving the same result including:

- \* calculation of the ratio over a longer cycle, by volume, even perhaps one or even two years
- \* stricter periodic evaluations by the ASSAF panels, but which take into account merit of guest edited issues and articles and not just disparate institutional percentages.

The objective should be to encourage good impactful research, to discourage bad research and opportunistic submissions and publishers, and to persuade authors to publish in higher impact local and international journals.

This, after all, is the point. The incentive was never meant to be a cash cow for universities or authors. But that is what it has become.

\* Tomaselli is a UKZN professor emeritus and UJ Distinguished Professor who is editor of two 'accredited' journals. See his previous comment on the SAPSE system: <http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/files/articles/Griot/ukzdaba%20may%202011.pdf>

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