Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC):

Publications issues paper

February 2013
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Purpose

“The ways in which the published findings of research are produced, disseminated, managed, consumed and preserved have changed fundamentally over the past twenty years.”

The purpose of this issues paper is to identify changes that need to be made to the Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) specifications in order to better accommodate the transformative shift to online publication of research.

The paper examines how well the existing HERDC specifications concerning research publications embrace research published electronically. Ultimately, the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (the department) wants to identify a contemporary approach to the treatment of electronic books under HERDC.

Setting the scene

There are two data returns in the HERDC; the Research Income Return and the Research Publications Return. This paper relates only to the specifications for reporting research publications. For further information on HERDC see Appendix A.

In response to a number of issues arising from the treatment of doctoral theses published online, the chronology of which is attached (Appendix B), the ‘electronic book’ category was removed from the 2011 HERDC specifications. Subsequently the department committed to consult on the issue of online publications and examine

1 Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings (‘Finch Group’), Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications, June 2012, p.24, via http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/
how research published electronically should be defined and included in the HERDC in future years. This paper is the focal point for that consultation.

**Consultative approach**

In 2012 the department sought nominations for a working group to consider this issue. The publications working group met on two occasions in late 2012 for scoping discussions based around its terms of reference as outlined below.

**Terms of reference**

1. Consider in detail the ‘Research Publications Return’ section of the HERDC specifications in light of key trends in the research sector and academic publishing, and taking into account DIISRTE and HEP requirements.

2. Examine the defining parameters of a ‘research publication’.

3. Consider whether or not books published in electronic format only should be included under HERDC, and if so establish eligibility criteria for their inclusion.

4. Consider future treatment of ‘vanity publishers’ under HERDC.

**Working group members**

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Professor Andrew Cheetham  
Pro Vice-Chancellor Research, University of Western Sydney

Professor Les Field  
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Mr Tony Sheil  
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Manager, ANU E-Press

Mr Derek Whitehead  
University Librarian, Swinburne

Ms Kate Deverall  
Assistant Director, Research Policy, ARC
Changes in academic publishing

The shift from paper to electronic publication of academic research is inevitable and is well underway. The working group believes the HERDC specifications need to accommodate this significant trend.

Overseas…

The UK Government commissioned report on open access to published research, the Finch Report, writes of the 'digital revolution in publishing' which has brought about 'a fundamental shift in research communications, particularly in relation to journals'. The sheer growth and globalisation of research, cost pressures on producers and consumers of it, technological developments and changing business models have all contributed to this shift.

And locally…

After travel, 'books, magazines and newspapers' are the second most common type of goods and services purchased online by Australian consumers.

The Book Industry Strategy Group (BISG) was established by the government in February 2010 to address the challenges presented by (among other issues) the emergence of digital technologies.

The final report to Government released September 2011 by BISG made some key findings regarding the scholarly publishing sub-sector. For example:

Most of the journals published in Australia are only available digitally and are produced by commercial publishers at commercial prices. This has placed academic libraries under budgetary pressure, which has reduced the libraries' ability to purchase scholarly monographs. This has had serious implications for university presses and their capacity to publish.

Titles released by the traditional university presses are generally released through ebook and print-on-demand formats.

Several universities have established e-presses (all originally associated with university libraries), which provide free electronic copies of titles by academics at the institution and digital copies of theses, but charge for print-on-demand books.

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2 Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings ('Finch Group'), Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications, June 2012, p.24, via http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/

The commercial realities of producing publications for which there is relatively low demand are forcing traditional university presses to move to electronic publishing:

*The new generation of university presses has largely dispensed with the traditional methods of mass printing as not suitable for scholarly books that tend to have specialist and limited audiences. Instead, the majority of titles are available as free-to-download digital files or as print-on-demand books, ensuring important, publicly funded research is available to the general public and never goes out of print.*

**Issues for the publications return**

**Format neutrality**

*Research publications should be assessed against HERDC criteria - and counted in an institution's publications return - irrespective of the format in which they are published. This is the principle of 'format neutrality'.*

In this context, clear definitions are necessary for terms such as 'research', 'publication' and 'peer review', which cover both traditional forms of publishing and electronic media. When determining parameters it should be noted, however, that there is a difference between arriving at definitions suitable for HERDC (relevant for this paper) and more general definitions of these terms. With a particular emphasis on electronic publications, strong parameters need to be developed around what research publications are acceptable for inclusion in the HERDC.

The publications working group considers that the HERDC criteria should be based on format neutrality. The remainder of this paper is based on this approach.

*Do you agree that the HERDC specification should be based on format neutrality?*

**Research publication**

Research publication is currently defined as ‘books, book chapters, journal articles and/or conference publications’ which comply with the definition of research. This paper does not propose to change this definition.

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The full definition can be found in 1.3.10 of the HERDC specifications. Research publications are characterised by:

- Substantial scholarly activity
- Originality
- Veracity
- Increasing the stock of knowledge; and
- Being in a form that enables the dissemination of knowledge.

There are three threshold tests for inclusion, and these are:

- the publication must comply with the definition of research
- the publication must be counted only once, and
- the publication must be reported in the appropriate year.

**Publication (the act of publishing)**

Publication (the act of publishing) is not currently defined in the HERDC specifications. However, examples or elements of publication are offered.

Books and book chapters:

- ‘must be offered for sale’
- ‘must have an ISBN’
- ‘must have been published by a commercial publisher’.

Journal articles:

- ‘must be published in a scholarly journal’
- ‘must have an ISSN’.

Conference publications:

- ‘must be published in full’ (various formats are given including paper-based, CD-stored and online)
- ‘must be presented at conferences, workshops or seminars of national or international significance’.

While in the broadest sense, any document made available online is ‘published’, for the purposes of HERDC, the process of ‘publication’ should involve peer review or some other form of quality control such as that offered by commercial publishers, where subject matter experts edit material prior to its publication.
Publication is more than the release of a work. It implies quality control and enhancement through processes such as peer review, editing, copy-editing, design, conversion of the work to appropriate digital format or formats, and — sometimes — printing. Publication may occur in any appropriate format, such as print, publication online, or publication in digital form on separate media.

**What is an adequate definition of the act of publication for the purposes of HERDC?**

**Peer review**

Peer review could be considered one of the more stringent forms of quality control and is required for both journal and conference publications. Peer review is not required for inclusion of books and book chapters in the HERDC specifications, largely on the basis that requiring it is not realistic or practical. It is not international practice to peer review books; the act of publishing and printing is a de facto acknowledgement of the quality of the publication. However, in a format neutral environment, there need to be other measures or controls on quality. Therefore, consideration needs to be given to what constitutes sufficient peer review for HERDC publications (as opposed to PhD assessment).

The current definition of peer review in the HERDC specifications is:

1.3.9. **Peer review**

An acceptable peer review process is one that involves an assessment or review of the research publication in its entirety before publication by independent, qualified experts. Independent in this context means independent of the author.

9.6

For journal articles, any of the following are acceptable as evidence of peer review:

- the journal is listed on the ARC’s ERA 2012 or 2010 journal lists
- the journal is listed in Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge Master Journal List
- the journal is classified as ‘refereed’ in the Ulrich’s Knowledgebase
- there is a statement in the journal which shows that contributions are peer reviewed
- there is a statement or acknowledgement from the journal editor which shows that contributions are peer reviewed
- a copy of a reviewer’s assessment relating to the article.

For conference publications, any of the following are acceptable as evidence of peer review:

- there is a statement in the conference proceedings which shows that contributions are peer reviewed
there is a statement or acknowledgement from the conference proceedings editor which shows that contributions are peer reviewed

a copy of a reviewer’s assessment relating to the conference paper.

The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) submission guidelines use a very similar definition of peer review.

For ERA purposes, an acceptable peer review process is one that involves an assessment or review, before publication, of the research output in its entirety by independent, qualified experts. Independent in this context means independent of the author. A statement from an author that a research output was peer reviewed is not sufficient evidence.

The definition is relevant to the eligibility of research outputs for ERA submission. For example, in relation to books, the guidelines specify that:

**Eligible books are those that meet all of the following criteria, in addition to the criteria outlined at 5.4.1:**

a) be a major work of scholarship;

b) be offered for sale in the form of:
   - hard copies, bound,
   - CD-ROMs, packaged, and/or
   - e-books, on subscription or fee basis;

c) have an International Standard Book Number (ISBN);

d) be entirely written by a single author, or by joint authors who share responsibility for the whole book; and

e) have been published by a commercial publisher.

The above requirements apply whether the publication is in print and/or online form. However, the ARC recognises that there are cases where a book has only been made available online, and has not been published by a commercial publisher and/or offered for sale. In these cases, the institution can only report the book if it has been through an acceptable peer review process and otherwise meets the relevant eligibility criteria, including meeting the definition of research. Institutions should note that publishing online by an individual—i.e. not by recognised commercial publishers, institutions or other organisations—is unlikely to meet the peer review requirements or provide sufficient editorial scrutiny.

The ERA framework sets criteria for the submission of book chapters, journal articles and conference publications that also require acceptable peer review processes.
For the purposes of HERDC publications, what constitutes sufficient peer review? Are the examples of acceptable evidence of peer review appropriate? Is a statement that the publication has been peer-reviewed sufficient?

The peer review requirement only applies to journal articles and conference publications (not books or book chapters). Is this appropriate?

What is an appropriate quality control approach for books and book chapters?

How can we ensure that online publishing will fit with all aspects of current HERDC specifications, for example avoid double counting?

**Doctoral theses**

When the issue of inclusion of theses arose as an issue in 2011, the higher education sector was broadly in agreement that theses should be excluded from the research publications collection and HERDC specifications should be tightened to reflect this. This could occur in section 9.3.1 of the specifications under:

*The types of books that do not meet the criteria include:*

textbooks

anthologies

edited books

creative works such as novels

translations (unless they have a major demonstrable original research component)

revisions or new editions

manuals and handbooks

**theses**

If a thesis was subsequently turned into a book, and met all other criteria, this could make it eligible for collection. Excluding doctoral theses eliminates the possibility of double counting those theses that are subsequently published as books.

*Is explicit exclusion from the HERDC specifications an appropriate way of dealing with doctoral theses?*

**Vanity publishing**

In its fact sheet on vanity publishing, the NSW Office of Fair Trading writes that:

* there are people prepared to help you get your work or biographical details published – for a price. They are called vanity or self publishers. That's because
the author pays for the editing, printing, marketing and distribution of the finished product.6

The 'Research Output and Impact' fact sheet series by the University of Queensland Library includes a fact sheet on vanity publishing. It states that vanity publishing usually:

- Does not require peer review
- Can require the author paying a fee for publication
- Involves the publisher selling work to readers.

While it may tempt early career researchers who are seeking publishing opportunities, vanity publishing does not employ the stringent processes of peer review and proofreading. Although online vanity publishers may claim that they facilitate peer review in the form of reader comments, the quality of publication cannot be controlled with the same vigour as a peer reviewed scholarly publication.7

Another view of vanity publishing is:

It doesn’t matter what publishers call their business models. If the authors end up paying the publishers money—whether at the front-end of publication in the form of editing costs, typesetting fees, subsidised print runs or ISBN purchases, or at the back end of publication by buying books by the boxful in order to resell them—then they are dealing with a vanity press. No matter how much that presses concerned insist that they are not.8

Vanity publishing occurs primarily where the likelihood of people buying or downloading a research publication is very low. The vanity publishing issue could be solved by a strengthening of the requirement for peer review. A suggestion to address this issue is that books would have to be commercially published (as opposed to self-published) OR require peer review.

Is vanity publishing a significant enough issue to require specific exclusion by the HERDC specifications? If it were to be specifically excluded, what would be the best way to do this?


Timetable

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<th>Month</th>
<th>Stage</th>
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<tr>
<td>November 2012</td>
<td>Meeting of working group</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2012</td>
<td>Preparation of issues paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>Issues paper released for two-week consultation; incorporation of feedback &amp; working group meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2013</td>
<td>HERDC specifications for 2013 released (draft to precede final, to allow time for input from the sector)</td>
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Consultation questions

Set out below are questions based on the issues canvassed in this paper. While a number of these questions are interrelated, they have been set out separately for ease of analysis and further discussion during the consultations.

Responses can address all or none of these specific questions. It would be helpful, however, if it was made clear when responses were addressing specific questions from the list.

Written submissions are invited by close of business Monday 4 March 2013, via email, to RBGrants@innovation.gov.au

1. **Do you agree that the HERDC specification should be based on format neutrality?**

2. **What is an adequate definition of the act of publication for the purposes of HERDC?**

3. **For the purposes of HERDC publications, what constitutes sufficient peer review? Are the examples of acceptable evidence of peer review appropriate? Is a statement that the publication has been peer-reviewed sufficient?**

4. **The peer review requirement only applies to journal articles and conference publications (not books or book chapters). Is this appropriate?**

5. **What is an appropriate quality control approach for books and book chapters?**

6. **How can we ensure that online publishing will fit with all aspects of current HERDC specifications, for example avoid double counting?**
7. *Is explicit exclusion from the HERDC specifications an appropriate way of dealing with doctoral theses?*

8. *Is vanity publishing a significant enough issue to require specific exclusion by the HERDC specifications? If it were to be specifically excluded, what would be the best way to do this?*
Appendices

Appendix A – HERDC background information

The HERDC is a data collection that is used to assess the relative research and research training outputs of higher education providers (HEPs). The collection is an important input in the allocation of research block grants worth more than $1.6 billion annually.

Research block grant funding is authorised by the Higher Education Support Act 2003 (HESA) which provides for grants to support ‘research by, and the research capability of, higher education providers’ as well as grants to support ‘the training of research students’. Research students are those students studying a Research Masters or a Research Doctorate (PhD).

The HERDC specifications are contained in a document that provides guidance to universities for collecting and providing data to the department. The Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (the department) regularly reviews elements of the HERDC specifications in close consultation with the higher education research sector. Essentially, it is updated and reissued each year to reflect policy changes or clarifications made over the previous 12 months.
### Appendix B – Chronology of events

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>For the first time, the 2007 HERDC specifications included provision for universities to count ‘e-books, on subscription or fee basis’ in their HERDC return.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late 2010</td>
<td>Further requirements applying to online-only books and book chapters were added to 9.3.1 of the 2011 HERDC specifications. Specifications were reviewed and endorsed by Universities Australia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>In its 2011 HERDC return one university interpreted the HERDC specifications as including online theses under the category of books. It was the only institution to take this approach.</td>
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<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Following legal advice, the department wrote to the university agreeing to the inclusion of online theses, and invited all other universities to resubmit their returns should they wish to do so. Feedback from institutions and peak bodies argued that theses available online should not be counted due to practical issues and potential to distort HERDC data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late 2011</td>
<td>Sector unanimously agreed to a proposal that in the short-term, DIISR set aside the ‘electronic books’ category in the 2011 HERDC, and consult with the sector on a more accurate definition of acceptable electronic works for future HERDC. The department wrote to institutions requesting them to submit the relevant number of books excluding online (‘electronic’) works. The 2012 HERDC specifications were amended to remove ‘e-books, on subscription or fee basis’ from the books category and to specify that ‘books and book chapters only published electronically currently can not be included under HERDC.’ The department committed to considering the issue in detail in 2012.</td>
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