Publish or Perish? The challenge of journal rankings for Māori-related research

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Question: To improve the assessment of our evidence portfolios, researchers are urged to target A* ranked or international journals as the next round of the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) draws closer. I have tracked down subject specific impact factors for some journals, but not actual A, B, C rankings. Does a ranked list of journals exist for Māori related research?

Keywords: journal rankings; Māori research; research evaluation

Answer:

A ranked journal list for Māori-related or indigenous research does not currently exist. However, a research project is now underway to create a list that, for the first time, will centre Māori-related research and will be heavily influenced by the values, practices and quality measures of people involved in Māori-related scholarship. The launch of phase two now requires feedback from scholars about which journals are recognised as repositories of quality Māori-related research. Details about the methodology and how to give feedback are outlined below.

Background

Research assessment exercises are potentially contentious given their role in determining university funding allocations, recruitment and promotion in many countries including the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand, and the proposed Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK. To ensure decisions are evidence based, a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures are used to assess the quality of research outputs and other aspects of performance. As researchers are urged to target high ranking journals, it can be tempting to look to impact factors and ranked lists for guidance about where to publish. The use of such tools in evaluating quality therefore raises some important issues.

The journal impact factor is a quantitative tool that indicates the 'impact' a journal has within its field by measuring the frequency with which an "average article" in a journal has been cited in a two year period. The impact factor has, according to its creator, unintentionally come to imply a gross approximation of a journal's prestige for the purposes of academic evaluation (Garfield, 1994). While impact has been defined as "primarily a measure of scientific utility rather than of scientific quality" (Seglen, 1997, p. 502). It has also come to be used as a proxy for quality.

An evaluation of the 2003 PBRF exercise found peer review panellists used 'proxies' of quality due to the impossibility of sighting all nominated research outputs (NROs) and difficulties in determining quality based on the evidence given: "The most commonly used indicator of quality was the international standing of journals. While publication in a leading journal could be taken as evidence of world class research we observed that panel members were often confronted with the problem that publication in a lesser journal, or a New Zealand journal, could not necessarily be taken to indicate the lack of quality. In the absence of clear positive evidence of quality panel members often scored an NRO as though the journal in which it was published represented its quality" (WEB Research, 2004).

Journal prestige may increase the visibility of research but will not necessarily enhance the impact of an individual article or researcher, for which individual measures are more appropriate (see Science Metrics, a *Nature News* special issue). Other problems associated with the use of journal impact factors include the skewed nature of the citation data, variations in disciplinary citation patterns, bias caused by different format types and incomplete coverage of some disciplinary journals in the Thomson Reuters database Web of Knowledge and Elsevier's Scopus (Garfield, 1994; Haddow & Genoni, 2010; Seglen, 1997). For some disciplines impact factors should be used cautiously, if at all, and in conjunction with informed peer evaluation or expert review. Peer evaluation provides a subjective assessment of the importance of a journal to peers in the field and is widely used in the ranking of journals.

A list of 20,712 peer reviewed journals was developed for the ERA in Australia based on disciplinary journal ranking exercises, expert review and public consultation. Journals were ranked according to four tiers of quality: A*, A, B and C. While some disciplines strictly applied international benchmarks such as citation analysis, others were based solely on peer esteem, or a mixture of both (see for example Crookes, Reis, & Jones, 2010; Fairbairn et al., 2009). In some cases the process was weighted towards local journals in recognition of their crucial function in supporting national scholarship. Despite this inbuilt flexibility Genoni and Haddow (2009) suggest issues with the status of local journals remain unresolved and the categorisation of 'regional journals' as typical of Category B will impact on the ability of local journals to achieve higher ratings (see descriptions at http://www.arc.gov.au/era/tiers_ranking.htm). Genoni and Haddow recommend revising the tier quality descriptions to acknowledge that impact and quality are also determined by the contribution a journal makes in the context of local, regional or national scholarship.

For academics producing Māori-related research, such categorisations of quality also present a dilemma. Journals that publish Māori-related or indigenous research rank relatively low on existing journal lists. Not only is it difficult to find high-ranking journals that publish on relevant topics, but most 'international' journals are unlikely to have the Māori research-related readership and editorial team needed to ensure informed peer review and critical exchange. One likely reason may be because the 'peers' who rate journals for ranking purposes are not the core audience for or users of Māori research. Another is that Māori-research related journals are often treated as fringe within other fields or disciplines. A respondent to the PBRF Māori research consultation process noted "… New Zealand is internationally recognised as a leader in indigenous research methodologies. The real barrier to international recognition is within specific disciplines as some discipline-specific national and international journals do not sufficiently recognise Māori methodology and research" (Sector Reference Group). This results in Māori-related research being under-valued when the vehicle in which it is published is not as well regarded as it could or should be. It also creates a tension for academics who want to support the development of Māori research publication avenues, without sacrificing their own PBRF success.

Beggs, Williams and Moller (2009) criticise current 'quality assurance' provisions for failing to acknowledge the quality indicators operating within the Māori community, stating that researchers are accountable on the local marae as well as to international journal review editors and academics. This highlights some fundamental differences in research methodology where community participation and peer review, as well as the applied benefits to the community are important. In his review of the PBRF model Adams (2008) noted a conflict between 'conventional' international standards and Māori approaches that may be difficult to resolve. While he suggests a new consensus about international reference points may emerge from research associated with research methodology of indigenous groups internationally, a respondent to the consultation process states "Māori/indigenous research has been formulated & should be given due consideration" (Sector Reference Group, p. 13). Despite PBRF guidelines stating Māori and/or New Zealand research may be world class, in the absence of

unambiguous, positive indicators of quality, the challenge remains: How is quality defined in relation to Māori research and how should this be measured?

Māori Journal Rankings Project

Emerging from this complex background, the Māori Journal Rankings Project sets out to create a journal ranking list that centres Māori research and feedback from Māori scholars. The project involves two data collection phases. The first was the collection of key standard data about scholarly journals that routinely publish Māori-related research across a range of disciplines. The project collected details about the editorial board, the number of years that the journal had existed, the journal's review processes and its acceptance rates. Based on this data the researchers were able to apply a formula, amended from similar calculations applied in other journal ranking systems, to create a 'quality' factor for the journals.

This first phase was not particularly 'Māori' in that the data collected was standard across most, if not all, similar journal rankings. One difference however was that rather than trying to collect data on all journals across a specific discipline or field of study, this list required the researchers to identify journals across a wide range of areas and then examine the contents pages to identify whether Māori-related work had been published in that forum. One of the challenges with this task was that almost any journal in the world has the potential to publish Māori-related research. However, to ensure that the final product is meaningful and easy to use, this initial phase was designed to target those journals most commonly and currently used by people wanting to read or publish Māori-related research.

The second phase of the project involves determining the 'peer esteem' factor for each of the identified journals. This will require input from people engaged in Māori-related research. It will require feedback about which, if any, of the journals they actually read and/or subscribe to, which of the journals they submit their work to or aspire to submit their work to, and which of the journals they recognise as the repositories of quality Māori-related research. It will also ask for advice about other journals that were missed in phase 1, but which are valued and commonly used publication avenues for Māori-related research.

The intention is that once the survey responses, or 'peer esteem' data have been collated, each journal will be allocated an 'esteem factor', which can then be combined with its 'quality' factor, leading to an overall ranking of journals that publish Māori-related research. The journal rankings list will then be made available online and will be reviewed and updated at regular intervals.

The success and influence of this project will depend on the quality and breadth of the feedback received as part of the phase 2 'peer esteem' feedback process. The project is led by Meegan Hall (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Tainui), and is also endorsed by the Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor Māori at Victoria University of Wellington and Te Kāhui Amokura. The MAI Review Journal and the MANU-Ao network have both agreed to support the project by promoting the Māori Journal Rankings Project 'Peer Esteem' survey amongst their readers and members. If you have previously or are currently engaged in Māori related research and you would like to give feedback about the scholarly journals that you read, write for, recommend etc then you can go to: http://vuw.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_9Y7mafaqCynh7ec

For further information about this project contact Meegan.Hall@vuw.ac.nz

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