



higher education & training

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Directorate: University Research Support and Policy Development

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THE USE OF RESEARCH OUTPUTS SECTOR REPORTS FOR RANKING PURPOSES

To all Vice-Chancellors (cc Deputy Vice-Chancellors for Research)

The Department of Higher Education and Training (the Department) annually publishes a sector report on the research publication output of the universities in the higher education sector. The report aims to provide the sector with information regarding annual trends in different research output categories such as journal articles, conference proceedings, books and book chapters. The report also presents information on key transformation indicators such as trends in output by gender, race and age. In doing so, the report does not pronounce on the ranking of the universities.

The sectoral reports do **not** provide information about the rankings of individual universities in the system. Nowhere in the report is there any reference to the ranking of universities. In some of the tables, the different types/categories of publications are listed per university. This is done merely to provide the sector with a comparative overview of output by category and should not be interpreted as a 'ranking' or 'league' table of South African universities.

It has unfortunately become more prevalent for some South African universities to cite or refer to the information presented in the sector reports to make (unwarranted) claims about being the best or top-ranked university in the country. The Department **does not support** this practice and strongly urges individual universities to desist from making such claims in the sector based on the sectoral reports. The sector report only includes a limited number of research performance indicators and does not report on other relevant indicators of research ranking such as, teaching or innovation at a university, number of patents, spin-out companies,

investment in Research and Development, postgraduate throughput rates and completion rates of students. Making claims that your university is the best in the country based on a single measure is simply unscientific and at best misleading. Such claims are not warranted on methodological grounds. It is unheard of to assess the performance of a university, which is a complex and multi-faceted institution, based on a few (selected) indicators.

In addition to the methodological reasons why this practice should be denounced, the Department has commented on the increasing prevalence of unethical and questionable publication practices in the sector leading to restatement of some of the report contents. In the most recent sector report, we have once again cautioned against such practices including the direct payment of incentives to university staff and students for publications. This practice, which is explicitly denounced in the *Research Output Policy* of 2015, has been identified as one of the drivers behind the growing gaming of the output subsidy system. We believe that statements about the ranking position of a specific university also contribute to such gaming behaviour. Such statements indirectly fuel competition within the sector and often result in unethical and even fraudulent publication behaviour by university academics and students.

I therefore, urge all Vice-Chancellors to assist the Department in ensuring the responsible use of the sector reports that we publish and that the basic aims and principles of *Research Output Policy* are upheld. In this regard, universities must henceforth not refer to the research output report when making public statements about rankings as this is a misrepresentation of the information in the report.

Should you have any queries on the matter please contact Mr Walter Ntuli at Ntuli.W@dhet.gov.za

Yours sincerely,



Dr Marcia Socikwa

Deputy Director-General: University Education

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