



higher education  
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Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Centre for Research  
on Evaluation,  
Science and Technology

## **The Publication Quality Framework Project**

Progress report to the Department of Higher Education and Training

Submitted by Prof. Johann Mouton (Project leader)

January 2025

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## 1. Governance and project management

The PQF project is formally defined as a university-led collaborative programme under the auspices of the UCDP (University Capacity Development Programme) of the DHET. The project is housed at Stellenbosch University and led by Prof. Johann Mouton (Project leader: CREST, Stellenbosch University) in partnership with Prof. Elisha Chiware (Director Librarian and Associate Professor in Library and Information Science, Cape Peninsula University of Technology). The project management structure consist of two main “entities’: The first is the PQF Project Team which consists of Professors Mouton and Chiware plus representatives from each of the following:

- the Department of Higher Education and Training (W. Ntuli/S. Essack)
- the Academy of Science of South Africa (S. Veldsman)
- the South African Research and Innovation Management Association (T. Theron)
- the National Research Foundation (G. Moolman)

In addition, an **expert advisory group was** also established to act as an ongoing reference group for the project and advise the project management team as and when required. The members of this group are:

- Dr Luci Abrahams (WITS)
- Prof. Phillip de Jager (UCT)
- Prof. Beth le Roux (UP)
- Prof. Bosire Onyancha (UNISA)
- Prof. Leslie Swartz (SU)
- Prof. Keyan Tomaselli (UJ)

## 2. Meetings held in 2024

Members of the Project Committee team and the Expert group met on the following occasions during 2024.

- On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May the Project Committee held a virtual meeting
- On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June we held our second Project Committee meeting in person at CREST, Stellenbosch University. Over the subsequent two days – the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of June – we held a consultative meeting with representatives from all the public universities together with the members of the Project Committee and the Project

Expert Group. This consultative meeting was attended by more than 70 people.

- On the 20<sup>th</sup> of August the Project Committee met at Pierneefskraal in Pretoria.
- On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October a joint meeting between the Project Committee and Expert group in person at Erinvale Estate, Somerset-West.

In addition to the meetings listed above, there were various 'bilateral' meetings between CREST and ASSAf as well as between CREST and DHET and between CREST and NRF (around the ROSS data).

All of these meetings were well attended and were aimed to discuss the progress on the four main work packages of the PQFP.

### **3. Reporting on progress within each work stream**

However, a general point must be made about how we are implementing each of the work streams. It is very clear from the project theory of change that WS 1 had to take precedence in the first year of the project. As we will show below, the deliverables of WS 1 feed into and provide a necessary foundation for work to be addressed in the subsequent work streams.

#### **3.1 Work stream 1: The establishment of a timely alert support system**

- a. Develop a website with appropriate resources on scholarly publishing in support of the policy framework*

The development of the website commenced has been assigned to a web developer around August 2024. This required that we develop specifications for the website which is currently still under construction.

The first version of the website is currently hosted on a development server before it will be moved to a production server (linked to the DHET website) and made publicly available. We also are still busy writing content for the PQFP page and developing new functionalities.

## PQFP

Through a fairly unique system of state subsidization, South African universities are directly rewarded for the number of publications and creative outputs that their staff produce. Two national policy documents (published in 2003 and 2015 respectively) provide the detail of this subsidy-system and how it should be implemented. An early version of this system was conceptualised in 1982 by the then National Department of Education as a way of incentivising South African science amidst its growing international (including scientific) isolation. The initial version of the system remained in place during the transition of South Africa to a democratic state in 1994. However, in 2001 the DHET initiated a process to fundamentally change the publication subsidy system. This process culminated in the 2003 document entitled "Policy and procedures for measurement of research output of public higher education institutions". The new policy was published in October 2003 and came into effect in January 2005. In 2011 the Department initiated another process to revise the 2003 Policy document. This process culminated in a revised Policy published in 2015 which was simply titled "Research Outputs Policy". This Policy is currently valid. One of the far-reaching consequences of the implementation of the new Framework (which came into effect in 2005) relates to the monetary values of publication units. In the period between 1987 and 2003 (under the former framework) the subsidy amount awarded for a research article averaged approximately R22 000. Under the new framework, the original so-called blind funding component of the General University Fund (block grants to universities) earmarked for research, was removed. This meant that as of 2005, an amount of approximately R1.5 billion rand was available (on a competitive basis) for rewarding research output – now also including research master's and doctoral graduates. This increase in unit awards had a major impact on research output in the sector. From an annual output of approximately 5500 in 2003, output increased threefold to reach more than 24 400 publication units by 2022.

A number of recent reports and article about the publication patterns of SA academics have, however, generated concern over the seeming emphasis on quantity (rather than quality) of publications being produced. Coupled with concerns over increasing evidence of questionable practices in scholarly publishing (plagiarism, ghost authorship, publication cartels, predatory publishing, and so on), have led the DHET to provide funding for a project to monitor and evaluate the existing research outputs policy and advise on its possible revision and improvement. This project is entitled the Publication Quality Framework Project (PQFP).

The dedicated website of the PQFP brings together a whole range of information and knowledge resources for all stakeholders involved in the PQFP. But it will also remain as a platform for the future support of research outputs by SA universities.

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An important component of the proposed website is a consolidated list of accredited journals together with clarificatory notes on the status of each journal. Such a consolidated list of journals (more than 48 000 unique titles) has been created. Current work includes standardizing journal names, reconciling differences in ISSN and ESSN-numbers, and so on. A screenshot of the layout of this page is displayed below.

## Journals

### LIST OF APPROVED JOURNALS (2025 – 2027)

A consolidated and validated list of all journals recognized and accredited by the DHET for articles published in 2025, 2026 and 2027 for submission

### LIST OF JOURNALS DELISTED IN 2025 AND 2026

A list of journals that are delisted or de-accredited during 2025 and 2026 and which cannot be submitted for subsidy in 2027 and 2028

### SA JOURNALS: Accreditation, profiles and statistics

A consolidated and updated list of all journals accredited by the DHET. All SA journals on this list will be reviewed every five years to ensure compliance with quality and integrity rules

### PREDATORY AND OTHER QUESTIONABLE JOURNALS

A list of confirmed predatory journals that do not qualify for subsidy. In addition, a second list of journals engaging in questionable practices that we advise should be avoided for submission of manuscript.

### ALERTS, COMMUNIQES SEND RESOURCES

The DHET and CREST will issue regular alerts and relevant communiques to all universities about any new developments in the PQFP. We also include resources relevant to the PQFP.

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### Contact Us

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### *b) Establish routines to improve the efficiency of the publication and creative outputs submissions*

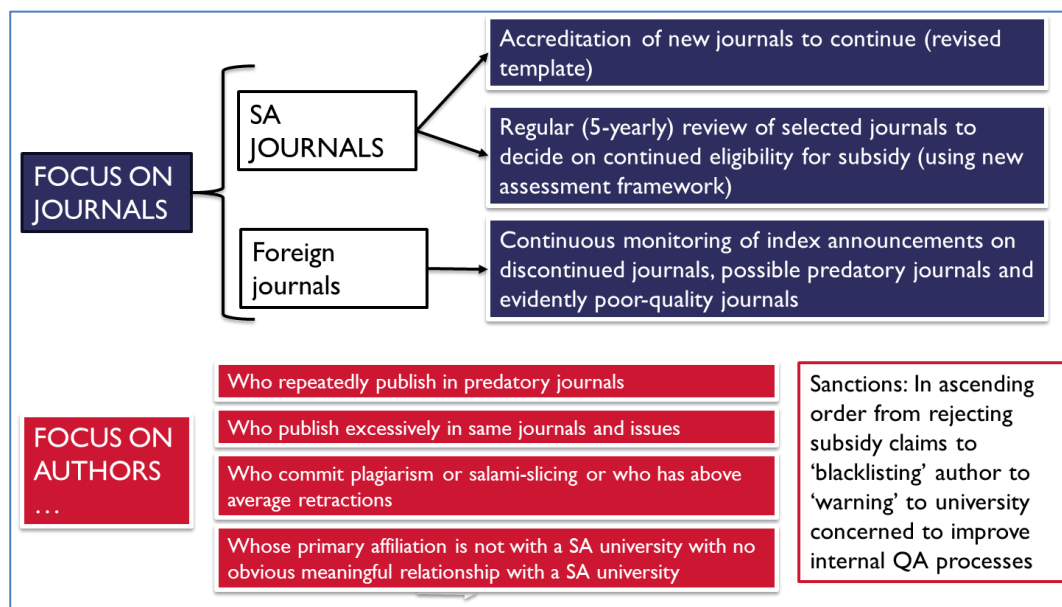
As in 2023, our focus in 2024, again was on improving the procedures for cleaning and standardization of all publication output submitted on the ROSS platform. Arguably the latest percentage of our time on the PQFP has been devoted to this activity. Amongst other things, CREST has conducted the following since June 2024:

- After receiving the article data from the NRF our database team conducted a range of queries to check for duplicates, journal title variants, calculation errors in subsidy value, possible predatory publishing and the like.
- This process continued until end of September (in close collaboration with DHET and NRF).
- By the end of November, a clean dataset for the 2023 submissions was done and validated. In the following weeks, these data were uploaded to the SA Knowledgebase on the CREST data platform
- The final sector report was completed by mid-January 2025 and submitted to the DHET

c) *Establish routines to ensure more efficiency of the DHET evaluation panels*

Although this task has not as yet been prioritized, we anticipate that we will address it more directly in 2025.

**3.2 Work stream 2: Monitor and evaluate the quality and integrity of all submissions to the DHET through rigorous and regular of all journals under the DHET subsidy-system**



In this work stream, CREST is supposed to work closely with ASSAf. I held a meeting with Dr Himla Soodyall and Ms Susan Veldsman on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2024. This meeting was necessary as it became clear from previous meetings with Ms Veldsman, that ASSAf was under the impression that they would receive funding under the PQFP to support the work (and salaries) for their project on ScieLO. This matter had to be clarified, but Dr Soodyall indicated that she first needs to get clarity from the DSI on where their funding for ScieLO will come from before they commit to co-operate on the PQFP. They had a scheduled meeting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March with the DSI. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April Dr Soodyall confirmed that ASSAf will in fact take responsibility for the activities earmarked for it under WS 2.

The proposal was that ALL the journals that are currently included in the list of DHET/SA journals, be analysed through the lens of the multi-decision framework. This task could be done by both ASSAf and CREST (and validated by DHET) in parallel first. Thereafter, by way of inter-rater reliability, the total scores can be

compared, and a final list be decided upon.

The outstanding data for this task to be done is to get the data on the % of articles by SA-affiliated authors. This task – which commenced In August 2024, has turned out to be more time-consuming than we anticipated. ASSAf, DHET and CREST held a meeting on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, where we compared notes and inspected the initial results. We then decided that it would take at least another 3 – 4 months to complete the data capturing task before we can start testing our multi-decision framework (MDF). At the time of writing this report, we are in conversation with ASSAf on the progress on their side. A meeting with them will be held soon and the outcome report at the Project Committee meeting.

### **3.3 Work stream 4: Support for ongoing support and analysis of SA scholarly publishing practices**

As part of the WS, CREST issued a call for proposals on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December for small projects to be funded under the PQFP. The text of this call is shown below.

CREST is currently engaged in a national collaborative project to investigate the quality of university publications funded under the DHET-subsidy framework. This three-year project is jointly undertaken by CREST and CPUT with a project committee with representation from DHET, NRF and ASSAf.

One of the work stream of the PQFP aims to encourage and strengthen scholarship and research in the general field of scholarly publishing in South Africa. To this end, we have budgeted for several smaller ‘grants’ to support studies between the value of R50 000 and R75 000. The idea is that academics and post-doctoral fellows who are interested in conducting a study (ca. 25 – 30 pages) in this field, can be supported.

Possible thematic areas that can be considered for funding under the PQFP:

- A critical assessment of the DHET-subsidy system
- Topics related to gaming of the publication system (publication cartel, ghost affiliations, etc.).
- Questionable publication behaviours by individual authors (salami slicing, hyper-publication, publication in predatory and hijacked journals)
- The role of university research offices in assuring the quality of publication submissions to the DHET

- The case for a list of accredited book publishers to replace the current panel-based system

### The process

One-page proposals to conduct a study in any of these or related topics are now invited and must be sent to Prof. Johann Mouton at [jm6@sun.ac.za](mailto:jm6@sun.ac.za). The proposal must contain a working title, a short description of the aims and proposed methodology and the duration of the study.

All proposals must reach us by **31<sup>st</sup> of January 2025**. Once the review panel has concluded its assessment of the proposals, we will be able to inform you no later than 15 February. For more information, please contact Marthie van Niekerk at [mvn3@sun.ac.za](mailto:mvn3@sun.ac.za)

**At the time of writing this report, we are pleased that we have already received 28 submissions.**

### Summary table of submitted research proposals

Authors	Title	University(ies)	Department	Budget
Mphahlele Ramashego Shila & Ngubane Sindile	The Role of University Research Offices in Assuring the Quality of Publication Submissions to the DHET	UNISA		R 75 000
Zuchukwu Nwokocho Clement	The role of university research offices in ensuring the quality of publication submissions to the department of higher education and training (DHET).	DUT	Department of Construction Management and Quantity Surveying	No budget
Phumzile Cele	The Role of University Research Offices in Assuring the Quality of Publication Submissions to the DHET	DUT		No budget
Asanda Pinky Mtukushe	The Function of University Research Offices in Safeguarding the Quality of Publication Submissions to the DHET	CPUT		No budget
Carlos da Silva	Mapping Scholarly Productivity: Addressing Systemic Challenges and Equity in Publication Output Across South African Universities	CUT		No budget

Vasanthrie Naidoo & Yemisi Oyegbile	Development of a support framework for international postdoctoral fellows at a university of technology in South Africa	DUT	Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences	No budget
Rudi Wynand de Lange	Identifying SA-authored papers in cloned and hijacked journals	TUT		No budget
Godfrey Maake	Factors contributing to and threat of predatory journals in academic publishing	TUT	Management Sciences in Organisational Leadership	No budget
Malesela Matlawe	Assessing the impact of university promotion on the value and integrity of the research output	CUT		No budget
Muthoni Musondi	Benchmarking Motivation Strategies to Enhance Research Productivity in South African Universities	CUT		No budget
Given Mutinta	Safeguarding academic excellence: the contribution of university research offices in publication quality assurance	NMU	Media and Communication Studies	No budget
Tinashe Malvern Madamombe <sup>1</sup> , Justice Kasiroori <sup>2</sup> , Strinivasan Soondrasan Pillay <sup>3</sup>	Assessing the Role of AI in Scholarly Publishing: Opportunities, Challenges, and Ethical Implications for DHET-Subsidized Research Outputs	DUT	Department of Public Management and Economics	No budget
Charl .C. Wolhuter	The Current DHET Research Funding System: Critical Assessment from a Publication Ethics Perspective	NWU	Comparative and International Education	R 30 000
Charl .C. Wolhuter	Public Funding of Scholarly Publications: Comparative International Perspectives	NWU	Comparative and International Education	R 50 000
Charl .C. Wolhuter	The current DHET Research Subsidy System: The quantity-quality play-off	NWU	Comparative and International Education	R 50 000
Charl .C. Wolhuter	Turning Doctoral Theses to Books: Possibilities and Caveats from a Publication Quality Framework Perspective	NWU	Comparative and International Education	R 40 000
Charl .C. Wolhuter	Research Output in South Africa under the DHET Subsidy System: Historical trends and patterns	NWU	Comparative and International Education	R 50 000

Dumisani Mabunde	Investigating questionable publication practices: salami slicing, hyper-publication, and engagement with predatory journals	UNiSA		
Haruna, Maana	Mapping the Nexus between University Subsidy Sharing Models and Research Productivity in South Africa	DUT	Department of Financial Accounting	R75 000
Christine Steininger,	The Role of University Research Offices in Assuring the Quality of Publication Submissions to DHET	WITS	GENUS: DSTI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Palaeosciences	R 52 000
NBSF	Incentive schemes for scholarly books	ASSAf		
Onyancha, Bosire	Towards a Framework for a Database of Approved Publishers of Scholarly Books and Book Chapters in South Africa	UNISA		
Simba, Magaisa	Enhancing Research Integrity: The Role of University Research Offices in Ensuring the Quality of Publication Submissions to the DHET	Rhodes		
Nolwando Mgilane* and Thango Thobel	Decoding the Metrics: Understanding how the DHET Subsidy Framework Shapes Academics Output	DUT	Financial Accounting	R75 000

## In conclusion

The overall progress with the PQFP is good. We have continued to make exceptional progress on WS1, began the work on WS2 and WS4. The only WS where we need to focus our attention in 2025 refers to the capacity-building activities as outlined in the original proposal. The first framework of these has been developed and will be submitted to the Project Committee soon.