

For a few dollars more

A new future for scholarly books?

*Dr Robin Derricourt, director of University of New South Wales Press, suggests how one small modification to the government research funding model could deliver major gains in impact and productivity for Government, universities and individual academics alike.*

At first appearance the numbers seem stark. Government is investing more and more public money on research: \$8.3 billion over 10 years. Defending taxpayer interests, Government wants to ensure a return on this investment and has systems intended to review quality, quantity and impact of output. Universities, which receive a significant portion of the research funding, collect publication data to measure output. For one category of publication – research monographs (books) – these figures suggest that the investment is failing and that universities have been unable to deliver ‘productivity’ in response to the increases in their research grants.

If correct, that is a problem for Government, and a problem for universities too, as they have to justify the research funding they receive. The university sector competes for its share of public expenditure on research; universities compete with each other for research funds; faculties, schools and individual researchers all have to compete for their share of resources.

It is not a problem for Australian publishers, since there are no Australian publishers who rely on specialist scholarly and scientific monographs for their survival. Nor is it a problem for overseas scholarly and scientific book publishers, since their impressive profits are based on more than enough books supplied by overseas scholars, and sold in the overseas market.

But it is an issue of public concern. And in one area – that of monographs on Australian topics – there is a relatively simple low-cost solution. A tiny proportion of the dollars invested in research could free up actual or potential research monographs in as large a number as their quality demanded. But let us explore further.

The figures for research inputs and outputs as posted on the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee’s own website are enough to set the scene. From 1995 to 2004, government funding of the universities’ scientific research (even excluding the Cooperative Research Centres) increased by 134%. Scholarly books published increased by only 30% (to a total of 646 titles). Book chapters went up by 55%, peer-reviewed articles by 75% and ‘refereed conference papers’ – arguably the most temporary and insubstantial of the measured categories – by 104%. From the Minister’s seat, does this reflect an adequate productivity gain? The program ‘Backing Australia’s Ability’ (BAA) has committed a massive \$8.3 billion of public funds to research in the period 2001 to 2011 – the impact and success of such a program will influence how it continues under future governments.

A few responses have been canvassed.

First, of course, is the issue of time lag – research expenditure today will only result in research results in a future year; and research results in the laboratory, field or library may only see formal publication (or other outputs) later still. That would be convincing if the time trends – now plotted back in detail to 1995 – did not show differently. There was no sudden investment whose impact is about to arrive just as suddenly.

Academics argue – nowadays more with resignation and despair than with passion – that while government and universities expect greater research work and research productivity, the reality of the academic environment places ever-greater pressures on time and focus due to the demands of increased administration, low levels of administrative support, heavy teaching loads with worsening student–teacher ratios, and more heat than light emanating from the research process itself (including the considerable time spent preparing research grant applications and reporting for compliance purposes).

The suggestion is often advanced that models of assessment have forced artificial behaviours in Australia’s research community. This argues that the pressure – on universities to show results, and by universities on their schools and academics to create listed outputs – favours multiple, short outputs of variable quality rather than the solid, definitive publication of monograph length that, in certain disciplines, was previously the norm. The statistics quoted above lend support to this, with conference papers that are regarded as refereed for proceedings volumes increasing by more than three times the rate of monographs. With the fond hope that productivity and impact assessment will become more sophisticated, this issue may retreat. The UK model of research quality concentrates more on impact of selected outputs (more likely to be a book in many disciplines) and of course the US tenure system in universities also, and perhaps infamously, favours the book – at least for humanities and social science disciplines.

There is no disagreement that the definition of publications for government and universities’ surveys can disadvantage certain books. In the publication counts, the definition of a research monograph is relatively narrow. It excludes works of synthesis that can be categorised as textbooks. And it excludes works of synthesis or interpretation that can be categorised as books for the general reader. This is particularly a problem for academics dealing with Australian publishers. Because there are no specialist publishers of scholarly monographs in Australia, Australian publishers will continue to urge authors either to write a book that can be used as a student text, or to broaden their argument and remove their technical material in order to reach a wider audience. And there are many such successful books by Australian scholars writing for an audience well beyond their academic peers – Clendinnen, Gaita, Flannery, Reynolds, and scores more. Make your own list.

At UNSW Press, despite receiving no university cash subsidy, we continue to expand our book publishing program, and revenues are growing faster than the national trend. However, this growth is not coming from specialist monographs. They now account for a minority of our titles, being mainly important manuscripts supported by external grants together with some internal subsidy from our own funds.

From time to time the argument is advanced that the book is a fading resource, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century relic on its last legs. This argument can be confused with the argument over electronic delivery, which applies to article-length outputs (journal literature). The shorter contribution is the norm in most of the science, technology and medical fields, and is common in many of the professional applied fields, including some of the social sciences. Electronic publication of these – commonly accompanied by print editions – in peer-reviewed journals gives a clear output and a clear productivity measure, as well as a basis for assessing impact. The continuing growth in numbers of print-and-electronic journals, maintaining the dual format, suggests the average impact will fall. Yet, at present, Australia is punching above its weight in many disciplines, with a world impact from journal literature well above its size – helped, of course, by having an English-language base and the drive to participate in the international, rather than the domestic, field.

For book-length literature, the electronic vision has proved a mirage. Publishers that set up electronic book publishing divisions a few years ago shrank or closed them down even faster than they had closed their CD-ROM publishing when the Internet made that irrelevant. The failure of the electronic monograph is partly due to readers not wanting to print off their own version of a full-length manuscript. And even more because the dual model that accompanies the journal (electronic to read now, print to keep forever and mark a permanent contribution) is not viable for books. Chiefly though this model failed to thrive because there is no business model, no adequate revenue source for sustainable monograph publishing (a 5-year grant from the Mellon Foundation is not a business model).

Books provide the extended argument, the full narrative and discussion of a complex subject, and remain a norm in many disciplines – especially, but not exclusively, in the humanities and social sciences. So, in fact, worldwide book publishing has continued to grow, and the great increase in numbers has been in specialist monographs serving specialist audiences. English is the language of this growth, and, by definition, as the number of new titles grows faster than the market for them, print runs continue to fall (as they have for 30 years or more) and prices increase accordingly.

Starkly, while Australian scholarly book output has staggered, that of the rest of the world has thrust ahead. The USA published 195,000 new titles of all categories in 2004, a 14% increase (university presses alone increased by 12%) and, while 2005 showed a slight fall overall, university presses continued to increase titles, especially in law and science. The UK recorded 205,000 new titles and new editions in 2005, which includes many books first published in the USA, and is a substantial increase over those recorded in 2004. No, the book is not dead.

And, in reality, this services the best Australian academics in many disciplines very well. Australian scholars in many international fields are respected and widely published by overseas book publishers. The Australian author of a monograph in philosophy, or mathematics, or ecology, or literary theory, has a large number of excellent, viable and enthusiastic overseas publishers to whom a book manuscript can be submitted. All are competing for the more important research writing in their fields. Quality will out.

The backbone of this strong and expanding publication of research monographs in English is the North American library market. US scientific and academic presses have a vast domestic market to serve; it demands quality, it demands service, but it responds to the needs of the richest research community in the world by acquiring research outputs in print. Scientific and scholarly imprints in the UK and continental Europe (especially Germany and the Netherlands) rise or fall on their access to this market. Indeed, subjects where the US market is falling – modern languages other than English being a notable example – are much harder to maintain.

So there may be internal pressures to account for why an Australian specialist in an international field might not complete a monograph for publication, but there is no shortage of international publishers happy to consider an outstanding book from an Australian author.

But – and it is a very large but – this does not extend to books on local Australian topics. Australian Studies is not an international field, and books on Australian topics are not what international presses want.

This said there are of course exceptions. Works in Aboriginal studies that fit into the discipline of anthropology will readily find an overseas publisher; Aboriginal art has an international following; marsupial biology too. But an overseas publisher is unlikely to publish an important monograph of quality on the applied ecology of Australia, or Aboriginal health, Australian history or literature or social policy or cultural studies. And if they do, it may not be actively marketed back to the Australian domestic audience. Yet there are many such fields where a book-length manuscript, rather than a conference paper, article or series of dispersed articles, has been seen as a necessary or natural outcome.

In these fields a local textbook or good book for the general reader will find a publisher, but a more specialist title most commonly will not. The commercial explanation is not complex. International publishers serving the North American market are selling to over 4000 universities and colleges, many with multiple libraries. Australia has under 39 universities, which generally boast of their centralised library systems and speedy interlibrary loans. One of the worst responses an Australian publisher can get to a promotion to academics of a local book is ‘excellent title, we’ll recommend it for our university library’. (The second worst is ‘extremely useful for students, we’ll make it recommended reading’.) For Australian academic monographs, Australia is not a market large enough to fund such books directly from sales revenue. The numbers don’t add up. And, while Australian publishers do have some supply routes to the international markets, they do not have the level of viability or image held by a press that specialises in international topics.

Australia’s university presses are not primarily academic monograph publishers. They are diverse and eclectic, but maintain books for wider audiences. Within the lists of the four professionally staffed and established presses – from the universities of Melbourne, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia, each with a very different mix of titles and priorities – are fiction, general reference, books of serious trade non-fiction by academics and non-academics, and textbooks, with specialist scholarly monographs in the minority. Institutional publishers of note, such as CSIRO Publishing, have a strong journal list too.

How then to encourage our academics in those Australian topics, and deliver outcomes from the very substantial funding for research in these areas? Despite buzz-words in Canberra, and fears in universities, there is very substantial investment in Australian Studies research. The proportion of Australia's 40,000 academics working on Australian topics is high. For many, in humanities and social science in particular, time alone (plus the salary and overhead costs associated with that) is the main cost of research, but there is substantial additional research funding particularly through ARC and other government programs. So how to encourage and enable publication of book-length outputs from the many different fields in Australian Studies?

Australian Research Council rules for the application of grants specifically state 'Publication costs ... will not be funded under *Discovery Projects*'. Given the pressure on ARC funds, this may not be unreasonable, and it would be unpopular to suggest that the existing allocation of ARC funding be divided still more thinly.

The answer need not be complex. A publisher has to achieve certain returns on any publication (and that includes an institutional publisher or university press). We must recover the costs of editing, design and printing in a reasonable time and contribute proportionately to the significant overheads associated with commissioning, production, marketing, sales and distribution, with some surplus to cover risk and expansion. A press will normally choose to publish a book that meets these criteria through an adequate contribution from sales revenue. International books, selling to a larger number of institutional libraries, can recover such costs through high unit prices. In Australia the academic library market is insufficient in size to carry any book, so scholarly books must be priced to attract some discretionary purchase by individual specialists. The combination of print run and price for a scholarly monograph is still insufficient on its own to refund the publisher's costs and overheads, yet only a small grant would be needed to push a book across the line. For many quality books of normal complexity and length a funding support of, say, \$10,000 may be sufficient to make publication viable. Title funding at this level is not contributing to a publisher's operating surplus, which still needs to come from elsewhere, but it would allow some cost-neutral publications that are currently blocked.

In terms of public interest, this is a small cost to pay to achieve impact and productivity from publicly funded research. The actual cost of research that leads to a monograph – including salary, institutional overheads, ARC and other allocated grants – might be anything from \$100,000 to over \$500,000. Such work may lead to a dead end where the author cannot publish or cannot publish in the way they would if they worked in an international field. The nominal sum of \$10,000 (a little more for a complex technical and illustrated title) could enable a well-written, strongly peer-reviewed manuscript to appear in a reputable imprint, priced so that specialists in Australia can acquire copies, and distributed worldwide where specialist markets for Australian books exist. Indeed, this money could, if necessary, be earmarked as a contribution towards external editing, design, printing and publishing were there sensitivity or misunderstanding about public money going to institutional publishers – though no such qualms exist in competitor nations, like the USA, Canada and the UK. Writ large, an annual funding of \$3 million dollars might allow up to 200 or 300 such books to appear; compared to a measure output in the AVCC figures of under 650.

Since so many of those 650 are in international fields from international publishers, it would massively increase the availability of research outputs from Australian Studies fields.

\$3 million annually is a tiny part of the \$8.3 billion of research funding committed in 'Backing Australia's Ability'. However, it could have a greater impact than \$3 million spent in many other ways. Many special funding allocations have been established under NCRIS and other BAA programs. What is needed is not further pressure on ARC funds, but a special fund (there is a long-established model in Canada) from which publishers and authors from Australia could draw, without excessive and expensive bureaucracy, for publication support of high-quality, peer-reviewed research monographs on Australian topics.

If such funding is not included in the development of the BAA program, it will not damage Australia's publishers. They have more than enough to publish in the areas of market strength that are viable without title subsidy, together with those few scholarly books that manage to secure institutional support through other means. But the academics researching in Australian Studies fields will continue to be the losers, as will their institutions. And, most of all, the losers will be the citizens, the taxpayers whose government funds the institutions that undertake research, provides the research grants and demands productivity, but does not complete the circle by contributing the modest cost that would allow for such productivity to be fulfilled.

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