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## Editorial 26(5)

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### The pursuit of knowledge

Roger Atkinson

The pursuit of knowledge is far more important than even knowledge itself. It involves discipline and training, which in turn are moulders of character. That is why the Labour movement has always striven, even passionately, for educative opportunities for all. (John Curtin, 1932) [1]

There is a good reason for turning to John Curtin's words about "The pursuit of knowledge ...", written over seventy-five years ago. Curtin's words indicate very elegantly a direction that scholarly journals and professional societies may emphasise in response to the Australian Research Council's "ERA" (Excellence in Research for Australia) "initiative" [2], a matter that has been an AJET concern for some time [3]. In essence (or, at least, in this humble opinion), the ERA "initiative" has narrowed the ARC's focus: it is concentrating upon *knowledge*, and losing sight of the bigger picture or prerequisite represented by the phrase *pursuit of knowledge*. Scholarly journals and professional societies have a great interest in the *pursuit* half of this phrase, and the keywords that John Curtin nominated, *discipline* and *training* (though most of us would prefer to expand *training* into numerous other, somewhat longer phrases such as lifelong learning, continuing professional education, postgraduate research, MBA, MEd, PhD, etc). It does not matter whether Curtin was referring to school children, or undergraduates, or apprentices, or mid-career workers, or in our case, aspiring authors, the fundamental implications of *the pursuit* (or possibly *the continuing pursuit*) are much the same for all. In particular, *the pursuit* is often or perhaps nearly always dependent upon facilitators – parents, teachers, lecturers, etc, or in our case, reviewers and editors.

Journal reviewers and editors are expected to do far more than a simple 'ticking of a box' to indicate acceptance or rejection. Most or even all journals emphasise the importance of good formative feedback, either to improve an acceptable article, or to increase the chances that a revised article containing additional data or other improvements will be acceptable upon resubmission. The problem is that providing good feedback is time consuming, requiring allocations that may range from about half an hour per article for a brief editorial reject made soon after receipt, to much

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longer times, perhaps up to three hours per article, for example giving detailed feedback from an external reviewer. Review and editorial work for scholarly journals is predominantly an honorary activity, although many of the multinational publisher journals pay some allowances to editors, and employ paid copy editors. Now, owing to the ERA "initiative", reviewers and editors for some or many journals face the prospect of an increased honorary workload and a decreased "return" for their effort. This prospect has arisen for reasons touched upon in a previous commentary [4]:

... one potential research question, "What is the impact of Tiering upon lower ranked journals?" Presumably, lower ranked Australian based journals (Table 1) will have to increase their reliance upon overseas authors, as Australian authors switch their preferences to higher ranked journals, even if that means migrating from their preferred group of journals to a more distantly related group of journals. [4]

If Australian authors do switch preferences, and the supply of high quality articles by experienced researchers to journals such as AJET is affected, then we face an increase in review and editorial workloads, as we put more time into attracting and assisting "new" authors who will replace our "lost" authors. The "new" authors are mostly from outside Australia, many being less experienced in research planning and research methods, and often there are increases in the review time and copy editing time required per article. Whilst the great majority of our reviewers do try to put in the extra time that may be required for submissions by "new" authors, we are very conscious that the great majority have encountered decreasing scope to allocate extra time, owing to general increases in teaching or service loads, and to higher expectations concerning research output (plus working harder to get it into A\* or A journals, in the case of Australian academics).

As to a decreased "return for effort", that has been imposed already, by the demotion of AJET from *Tier A* to *Tier B*, as reported in AJET Editorial 26(1) [5]. It could be a bit less rewarding to do honorary work for a *Tier B* journal compared with a *Tier A*. The key test is likely to be late in 2010 when we have space to revive the stalled process



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for recruiting a team of Associate Editors, nominated in Editorial 25(5) [6] as a key priority for AJET in 2010. Will there be a good supply of volunteers for a journal that is “only a Tier B”?

How will these trends, if occurring, impact upon *the pursuit of knowledge*? Unlikely to “momentum increased”, as far as AJET is concerned, though it’s uncertain where the outcome will be in the range between “momentum maintained” and “momentum lost”. At least we have appropriate baseline data, especially in the form of review outcomes data (see later in this Editorial, for the 2010 update), and our “internationalisation” data, last updated in Editorial 25(3) [7]. Add new update for AJET’s “internationalisation” data table to the priority list!

### **Community Cabinet Meeting, Como Secondary College, 9 June 2010**

Whilst this may appear to be a most unusual heading for an editorial item in AJET, there is a logical explanation and possibly a high relevance for AJET, and perhaps for many other Australian based journals and conference proceedings. “Community Cabinet meetings are part of the Prime Minister’s commitment to ensure close consultation with the Australian people on the things that concern them, whether they are national or local matters” [8]. As the Como venue [9] was within walking distance (for RJA!), this was a not to be missed opportunity to consult on a “thing that concerns”. So I booked myself a “one-on-one” meeting with Senator the Hon Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research [10], whose portfolio includes the Australian Research Council [11]. Senator Carr could not attend the Community Cabinet Meeting, so my allocation was with Senator the Hon Joe Ludwig, Cabinet Secretary and Special Minister of State [12]. Ten minutes allocated, *PowerPoint* not permitted!

In a “one pager” [13] tabled at the meeting, I tried to develop a concise “invitation” to the ARC to address concerns about its implementation of “Ranked outlets” [14, 15]:

We seek the Minister’s support and assistance in directing two requests to the Australian Research Council, giving them an importance similar to a Parliamentary Question:

- i. Provide a research paper (prepared to research journal standards) that explains the purposes, derivations and research based validations of the “Tiers for the Australian Ranking of Journals”, and explains the evidence upon which the 2010 rankings are based.



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- ii. Provide a review of the impact of "Tiers" upon Australian based journals, relative to their major competitors, which are nearly all owned by European and American multinational publishers, with particular reference to professional society, open access, not for profit, online only journals. Explain the rationale for imposing a downgrading upon Australian journals (such as AJET) and professional society conferences (such as ascilite) and give evidence that the presumed benefits will outweigh the disadvantageous impacts. [13]

Now, what are the chances that the ARC will treat these questions as "similar to a Parliamentary Question"? To be realistic: Vanishingly small. Firstly, the ARC deals with really senior people, VCs and PVC(R)s, and it not an ordinary department of the Australian Government, it is an "External Agency". My email delivering the "one pager" in electronic form conceded our smallness in the bigger scheme of things [13]:

I was very surprised (though pleased) to find senior Departmental officials in attendance, and I thank you for "being there" and for "caring". The ARC's implementation of "Ranked outlets" is only one small part of its ERA agenda, and the fortunes of one journal may seem inconsequential when your list amounts to about 20,712 journals. Nevertheless, the ARC should not place itself at risk of being seen as indifferent towards legitimate concerns about the extent to which their policies are evidence based and open to scrutiny by rank and file academics in the "research trenches", and the impact these policies are likely to have upon Australian journals and conferences. [13]

Also in the covering email, I tried to draw attention to the lack of proper journal style publications by the ARC, and to the role of editors (who usually are rather junior persons, rarely drawn from VC and PVC(R) ranks) [13]. Perhaps we can:

move towards more meaningful, better researched, more evidence based, sounder explanations of the "Tiers", and some improved recognition of the role of journals and their editors. More meaningful than the *PowerPoints* listed under [http://www.arc.gov.au/media/ARC\\_Presentations.htm](http://www.arc.gov.au/media/ARC_Presentations.htm). After all, we editors are the coal face persons who, by means of the peer review processes that we organise, provide the ARC with one metric, albeit a crude metric, for assessing research excellence. Editors are the persons who perhaps are better placed than others to be sources of evidence on the goodness of correlations between "tier rank of research outlet", "esteem" as estimated by citation counts, or various other metrics, and the merit of the research that is recorded in a publication in a "ranked outlet". [13]

Secondly, the ARC will not need to take notice of any matter referred by a Minister. Shortly after the Community Cabinet Meeting in Como, far more dramatic events seized everyone's attention: the change of Prime Minister [16], and the calling of the Federal election [17]. Nevertheless, although the ARC is unlikely to follow up the "invitations" i. and ii. given above, I'm hopeful that at least some researchers will



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perceive i. and ii. as under-researched topics worthy of increased attention. For AJET's part, we will give more attention to citation counts from *Google Scholar* and other sources, and to other metrics such as the Thomson Reuters *Impact Factor* (for example, see below), exploring how these relate to the ARC's "tier rank of research outlet". Also due for more research is the matter of variability in the review process for journals and conferences, in particular the impact of differences between reviewers.

### AJET review process outcomes: 2009 data

The last report on AJET's review process was published in AJET Editorial 25(5) [6]. The update in Table 1 indicates slower than hoped for progress with the backlog. Nevertheless, we expect to attain our benchmark of three months maximum for AJET's review process by about the end of September. The small increase in AJET's 2009 acceptance rate is not regarded as a beginning of an upward trend.

Table 1: Article review outcomes AJET 2003-2010

Year of receipt	No. rec'd	No. rejected editorially (b)	No. reject ext review (b)	No. with-drawn (c)	No. pending	No. accept(d)	No. published (d)	% accepted (e)
2003	61	34	14	0	0	13	24	21.3%
2004	97	51	13	2	0	31	21	32.0%
2005	91	47	9	5	0	30	30	33.0%
2006	100	59	9	3	0	29	29	29.0%
2007	119	67	14	4	0	34	30	28.6%
2008	127	71	20	1	0	35	42	27.6%
2009	186	95	27	2	0	62	45	33.3%
2010(a)	128	23	3	2	85	15	56	-

- Data for 2010 in columns 2-8 is at 18 July 2010. Data for *ascilite Auckland 2009* Outstanding Paper Awards (5 recipients) and Special issue 26(4) (10 acceptances) are included. The increase in 2009's 'No. rec'd' (a 46% increase over 2008 numbers) was one of the main causes for the current backlog ('No. pending') in the review process.
- Some of the rejected articles may appear again as receivals later in the same year or in a subsequent year. The reasons for counting these instances as rejections are to enable a clearer cut off for each year's outcomes, and to align data collection with the editorial advice, used in a significant proportion of cases, 'Reject. Invite resubmission of a revised or expanded work for a new review process'.
- Withdrawn means withdrawn at the request of the authors.
- The number of articles accepted from a particular year's receivals does not correspond to the number published in each year, owing to time taken for review and revisions, and fluctuations in the speed of these processes.
- % accepted is calculated from column 2 (No. rec'd) and column 7 (No. accepted).

### Idle Moment 40: *Impact Factor* revisited

In Table 1 in AJET Editorial 26(3) [18] we examined rankings for a number of educational technology journals, according to the Thomson Reuters *Impact Factor* (2008 values) and the ARC's *Tiers* list [19, 20]. With the recent publication of AJET's first *Impact Factor*, 1.278, we can move AJET up four places. Table 2 provides an updated version.

Table 2: Comparing *Impact Factor* and *Tiers* rankings for some journals

Journal	<i>Impact Factor</i> (a)	Rank order (b)	<i>Tiers 2010</i> (c)	URL for obtaining <i>Impact Factor</i>
Computers & Education	Yes	1	A	<a href="http://www.elsevier.com/locate/issn/03601315">http://www.elsevier.com/locate/issn/03601315</a>
Instructional Science	Yes	2	A	<a href="http://www.springer.com/education+%26+language/learning+%26+instruction/journal/11251">http://www.springer.com/education+%26+language/learning+%26+instruction/journal/11251</a>
J. of Computer Assisted Learning	Yes	3	A	<a href="http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0266-4909">http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0266-4909</a>
Australasian J. of Educ. Technology	Yes 1.278	4	B	<a href="http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/">http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/</a>
British J. of Educational Technology	Yes	5	A	<a href="http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0007-1013">http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0007-1013</a>
Educational Technology, Research & Development	Yes	6	A	<a href="http://www.springer.com/east/home/education/learning+%26+instruction?SGWID=5-40666-70-50612191-detailsPage=journal%26description">http://www.springer.com/east/home/education/learning+%26+instruction?SGWID=5-40666-70-50612191-detailsPage=journal%26description</a>
Educational Technology & Society	Yes	7	B	<a href="http://www.ifets.info/others/">http://www.ifets.info/others/</a>
ALT-J: Research in Learning Technol.	No	Not ranked	A	<a href="http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09687769.asp">http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09687769.asp</a>
J. of Technology & Teacher Education	No	Not ranked	B	<a href="http://www.aace.org/pubs/jtate/">http://www.aace.org/pubs/jtate/</a>
Technology, Pedagogy & Education	No	Not ranked	B	<a href="http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/1475939X.asp">http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/1475939X.asp</a>
Australian Educational Computing	No	Not ranked	C	<a href="http://www.acce.edu.au/item.asp?pid=1124">http://www.acce.edu.au/item.asp?pid=1124</a>
Asia-Pacific J. of Teacher Education	No	Not ranked	A*	<a href="http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/1359866X.asp">http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/1359866X.asp</a>
Higher Educ. Res. and Development	No (pending)	Not ranked	A	<a href="http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/07294360.asp">http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/07294360.asp</a>

a. Based on statements appearing (or not appearing!) on journal websites; values from Thomson Reuters' 2009 *Journal Citation Reports*.  
 b. Ranked according to *IF* values as published at the URLs listed in column 5 (13 July 2010).  
 c. ARC *Tier* rankings may be obtained conveniently from [19].

Previously, we characterised the correlation between *Impact Factor* ranking and *Tiers 2010* ranking as "reasonably good" [18]. Now we could downgrade that correlation, perhaps to "moderately good". And of course, at long last, we can drop the word "pending" which for some years has featured in all references to AJET's *Impact Factor* [18].



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## Idle Moment 41: Death of an Agency

AJET's copy editing routine includes the checking and correcting of references, with some effort put into the verification and addition of URLs, if available for open access references. The effort is not 'large', given the ease and speed with which *Google* and *Google Scholar* may be used for this purpose. The main challenge in the copy editing of reference lists is to 'stay on task', resisting the temptation to read... and read..., but an irresistible temptation arose very recently. This was when adding the URL <http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=25921> [21] to Andrew Hope's article [22] in this issue, AJET 26(5). The irresistible temptation was the following disclaimer that appeared at the beginning of the web page for this reference and several others I have checked recently:

A new UK Government took office on 11 May. As a result the content on this site may not reflect current Government policy. All statutory guidance and legislation published on this site continues to reflect the current legal position unless indicated otherwise. [21]

We suspect that many or even most academics blithely ignore disclaimers, and if any attention is given, it is more likely to be for the purpose of poking fun at someone else's 'pomposity' (or whatever). AJET's own disclaimer is quite modest, restrained, and deeply buried [23]. However, the disclaimer by the 'new UK Government' establishes a very novel genre! Is there a suggestion that some persons may perceive academic research works commissioned by the UK Government and its agencies, such as Becta [24], as 'reflections of current Government policy'? To reiterate the issue more bluntly (in a kind of colonial larrikan style), is there a possibility that academic research funded by a previous UK Government is now a bit 'suss', somewhat lessened in integrity, and thus warranting a blanket disclaimer?

So, after that fun about disclaimers, let's turn to a more serious, underlying matter:

### Next steps for Becta

On 24 May 2010 the Government announced a package of measures to reduce expenditure in the public sector. This included the planned closure of Becta. [25]

From an editorial perspective, we hope, quite fervently, that 'the planned closure of Becta' (the *British Educational Communications and Technology Agency*) does not lead to 'switching off' the servers containing a wealth of educational technology research and practical advice, that has done so much to maintain the British presence in this area of academic endeavour. Returning to the beginning of this *Idle Moment*, such a 'switching off' would break a rather large number of Becta URLs inserted into AJET articles during many years of copy editing of reference lists!

Roger Atkinson and Catherine McLoughlin  
*AJET Production Editor and AJET Editor*

## Endnotes

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Sydney, 5-8 December 2010. Website <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney10/>