

EDITORIAL

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Since this is the last issue of *People and Place* we wish to use the opportunity to thank subscribers, the dozens of writers who have contributed to the journal and those who have served as editorial board members and referees. We greatly appreciate your support.

In 1993 we perceived the need for a forum in which to publicise and promote debate about issues important to the development of Australian society—*People and Place* was the outcome. Since its inception it has played a significant role in providing information, analysis and policy advice based upon careful data analysis. This has contributed to wide-ranging reforms in the fields of immigration, education, health and urban policy. A major focus has been on Australia's population and its size, growth and distribution.

A key feature of the research published in *People and Place* is that much of it originated in projects for Commonwealth and state government departments and agencies as well as for private firms. This work, known in the research community as industry-based research, also provided the financial basis for the publication of the journal and for the staff engaged in data analysis.

From the outset we aimed to make *People and Place* an academic journal accessible to a wide audience. Our strategy has been to invite contributions from researchers according to their expertise and the significance of their work to topical Australian population issues. We have tried to have work refereed and published

quickly so as to maximise its relevance and topicality. These invited contributions have been supplemented by articles sent to us by authors, some from overseas, who wanted to publish in *People and Place*.

For most of the 18 years of its publication, universities have counted articles in *People and Place* written by their staff as contributions to the universities' research output. This situation began to change in 2009 when a new scheme for ranking journals was introduced by the Australian Government and implemented by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Under the label of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) journals were ranked from A+ (best) to C (worst). Almost all of the A+ journals are elite international journals with little interest in research focused on Australian conditions. While *People and Place* has had a significant influence on public policy in Australia, it does not have an international profile.

The initial ERA evaluation committee gave it a B ranking, but the ARC subsequently downgraded this to a C. This means that research published in *People and Place* by academics actually diminishes the possibility of their university gaining a high rating for demography in the ERA system. Following a logic similar to the journal-ranking process ERA also does not count industry-based research, including government reports which address significant social or economic issues. In 2010 the ERA system was fully implemented and the ARC has now completed its first ERA-based ranking of universities' research.

There is fierce competition between Australian universities for high research status and the income needed to finance it. The Australian Government supplies most of the funds and has made it clear that it will differentiate its contribution according to the research excellence of individual universities as determined by ERA. Thus, performance in the ERA system has become critical to the financial health of universities.

Not surprisingly, Monash University has reacted by putting pressure on low-ranked departments and research centres to change the way they go about their work. In our case, the pressure has been to restructure *People and Place* so that it becomes a conventional academic journal. This would require a complete change in the journal's philosophy.

Under the circumstances we decided that it would be better for us to put our time and hard-earned industry money to better uses; thus the decision to stop publishing.

People and Place, and the research it publishes, is not alone. In the social sciences and humanities, research relating to local issues is of huge importance, as is research contributing to the solution of social problems in Australia. Such work is unlikely to be rewarded in the current journal-classification system, since few international journals will have any interest in such issues. And while the ERA process also ignores industry research, typically government departments and agencies commission such work precisely because they judge that it is needed.

Does the Australian Government really want university-based social scientists to turn their backs on local issues? We are proud of the excellent reputation of our respective colleagues in the physical sciences at Swinburne and in engineering and medical science at Monash for their top rating in the ERA review. Excellence according to the academic criterion of

contribution to knowledge is important. However, as the present rules operate, this is the only outcome the government is promoting.

It has been a recurrent theme in Australian Government directions to universities over the past two decades that research ought to be relevant to the progress of Australian industry and to the resolution of Australian social issues. Most universities incorporate such a commitment into their statements of purpose. This is particularly true of universities which have developed ties to industry through their applied science and engineering departments. The Group of Eight universities also promote their relevance to the Australian community. For example, Monash University emphasises that its research activities should be about impact. The university's *Research Strategic Plan 2011–2015* states that this impact includes: 'Acknowledged contributions to government policy, social change and wellbeing'. It goes on to say that: 'Relevant research is outward looking and responsible to what is needed by others, and to the problems in society—those that require innovative approaches or solutions—that can benefit from the insights research provides'. But research of this kind is actively discouraged by the ERA system.

As things stand, it will not be possible for young Australian academics to follow our path. Where will the future generations of Australian social scientists and demographers find the opportunity to undertake research training? All those aspiring to do research relevant to their community will find promotional opportunities limited because universities will be preoccupied with improving their research rating according to the ERA criteria. Australian social research for the benefit of the Australian community has no future under the new system.