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Editorial: Lee Harvey

Future for printed journals

The evolution of technology and the increasing reliance on the Internet has, inevitably, led to suggestions that the current process for publishing academic articles, *viz.* in printed journals has a limited future. As of 27 February 2022, *Quality in Higher Education* had this year's entire issue of articles already published online. The situation is getting progressively worse with more and more papers issued online well before they ever appear in print; the paper version is thus dated before it is published. Of course, it is not just *Quality in Higher Education* that is in this position. As of 27 January 2022, *Studies in Higher Education* had 117 articles published online, some going back to July 2019, that's two and a half years and still not in a published paper issue. *Studies* has six issues a year, a total of around 95 articles, so the backlog is growing all the time. The current issue of *Studies* (47(1)) features articles all published online in February and March 2020!

The process seems unsustainable in its current guise and, in the case of *Studies*, has contributed to the reluctant resignation of the Editor, Leo Goedegebuure (2022):

When we started as the new editorial team, we knew it would be hard work. But we could not have predicted the massive amount of work it takes to deal with a very significant rise in submissions whilst maintaining editorial integrity and not overloading the peer review system that underpins the quality of our journal. Reflecting on this at the end of last year, I came to the conclusion that being editor-in-chief of *Studies* was too big a call given both my professional and particularly personal commitments. Hence with regret I handed in my resignation, effective from May this year. So this is my last editorial.

The explosion in submissions and the 'queuing' of papers for years before they appear in print does cast doubt about the continued viability of the paper journal. Of course, there are journals that now publish exclusively online, around 80 of them currently, but many still keep the print journal format. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, for example, an online only journal has volumes and issues (6 issues per volume). For people accessing and reading online articles, this grouping into journal issues is irrelevant unless the particular issue has a theme.

What is to be done about the pile-up of papers online and the subsequent publication in the paper journal of 'old' papers? Should the journal not publish online more than one year in advance of the print version? Would that, then, lead to a much tighter selection process? Or a further explosion in the number of journals? Should, on the contrary, the journal focus on a procedure to publish on line (that

just isn't a succession of apparently random papers) and dispense with the paper version altogether: saving millions of trees in the process?

Does it matter to authors that their contribution is included in the paper version of the journal? A straw poll among potential authors for this journal were mostly of the opinion that appearing in print didn't matter as 'no-one reads the paper version anymore'; appearing online as soon as possible was what was wanted. Indeed, if the online readership of a journal like *Nature* is anything to go by, there would be no way a paper version could reach the millions of readers of the journal a month.

So, if the paper version is becoming of marginal importance, why continue with it? As a contributing author, it is good to have a physical, well-presented, copy of the journal containing one's article. Furthermore, as of the moment, a paper journal has more kudos than an online-only journal. However, that is bound to change. A third consideration is that maintaining and reinforcing the need for print journals maintains the dominance of the five major publishers and, arguably, retains the credibility of the journal and its contents through a validated peer-review process. However, there would be no reason why a journal should not have such a credible selection and editing procedure just because it is online-only. A more fundamental issue is that, if all journals were online-only, then there would be very little to stop other people or organisations from setting up journals and undermining the oligopolistic control of the main journal publishers. Universities, for example, could publish their own journals, so could learned societies or even Students Unions.

It wouldn't matter on what site a journal is published because, for the reader searching for research on a specific topic, the normal procedure is to either search via Google or go to a journal database such as ERIC, PubMed, Muse, Scopus or DiVA and search, rather than start by searching a specific journal. The point, then, is that it wouldn't matter where the articles are published. What would matter is the reliability of the particular contribution.

Editorial overview and peer review have been the way this credibility has been built up, established, monitored and validated. Would the potential plethora of publications outside the already-established journal peer-review protocols be able to assure reliability and validity? How would the reader be able to tell? How, indeed, does the reader of current journals tell whether the content they read is credible? In the main, they place trust in the academic journal process. By and large, that works, *except* when unscrupulous cheats manage to get fraudulent research published (Harvey, 2020).

Could there be an alternative way? For example, publish the article as sent by the author (appropriately edited) and then invite commentary on the article, blog-style, but with commentators clearly stating their credentials (name and institution). Then instead of a couple of peers commenting (anonymously) on the pre-publication draft, the whole community, potentially, could openly comment and critique the contribution.

In any event, it is becoming uncomfortable to publish print journals that are carrying articles two years out of date: that's two years further out of date than the online article, which in areas such as the social sciences could be based on data dating back several years prior to the completion of the article. Something needs to be done.

In this issue

Following on from the discussion above, the increase in submissions does mean that papers that might have been considered a decade ago are now being rejected.

Conversely, though, we are receiving far more submissions based on trivial empirical data: very small samples from single institutions. The workload on editors continues to grow and there is a significant problem in getting reviews as potential referees are being overwhelmed on top of an increasing workload for their day job. One editor of a criminology journal told me that a submitted article to the journal was turned down by nine referees before being reviewed by the tenth. This clearly substantially increases the time to publication.

This issue starts with an extended editorial that argues for higher education to go back to basics in collecting and analysing student views.

The next three papers all consider cross-border higher education.

Christopher Hill and Fion Choon Boey Lim evaluate the sustainability of transnational higher education in the Middle East and Asia. They use capacity building and graduate employment as factors to assess educational value and sustainability, both from an operational perspective and the value of a degree for students.

Ming Cheng and Jokha Al Shukaili also examine the development of offshore programmes, this time in Oman, and show that there is considerable dependence on international partners to monitor their offshore programmes. This compromises quality because, *inter alia*, local academics have limited involvement in developing programmes and students get limited feedback on their coursework.

Teresa Sánchez-Chaparro, Bernard Remaud, Víctor Gómez-Frías, Caty Duykaerts and Anne-Marie Jolly explore the cross-border quality assurance focusing on engineering education in Belgium that is accredited by a French agency in partnership with a Belgian agency. They identify a range of benefits and challenges but conclude that cross-border accreditation could help clarify the links and differences among different educational models at the European level.

In their study of academic staff at a university in Iran, Ahmad Keykha, Mitra Ezati and Zahra Khodayari analyse the perceptions and lived experiences of academic staff using Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Considerable numbers of barriers were identified but, overall, better funding of universities and, more importantly, increasing the autonomy of universities in decision making would improve the quality of higher education.

Myrte Legemaate, Roel Grol, Jeroen Huisman, Helma Oolbekkink-Marchand and Loek Nieuwenhuis use insights from the field of socio-technical systems design to explore how to enhance a quality culture. They conclude that what is necessary is a shared value of collective ownership and continuous improvement, taking into account engagement, teamwork and enabling leadership.

Kasja Weenink, Noelle Aarts and Sandra Jacobs explore the quality issues that directors of Dutch social science bachelor programmes considered relevant in their specific situations. The link with funding was clear and *inter alia* the directors' coping strategies included bracketing quality into manageable elements. The issues of responsibility and power were foregrounded. Gender differences and the tendency to value research over education seem to affect the directors' room for manoeuvre.

Vinit Kumar, Yusuf Akhter and Gopal Ji analyse the newly adopted University Grants Commission performance-based evaluation and funding model in India. They critiqued the ranking model and compared the results with the NIRF and NAAC ratings, which did not align. They discuss the aspirations of central universities in India aspiring to 'world-class' status.

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